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THE PILLARS OF CHAMBALOR

—a Brak Story

by John Jakes

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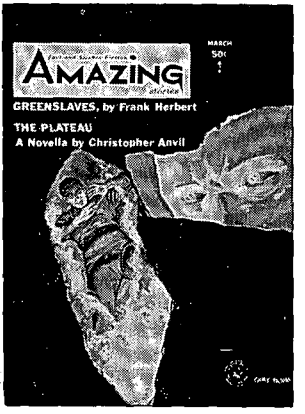

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Guest Editorial

MONSTERS & MONSTER-LOVERS

By FRITZ LEIBER

All the public prints recently have been full of articles exclaiming over the "monster" craze in toys, models, television, magazines. It is as if these "mainstream" folk had never heard of the real monsters which have lived in fantasy fiction through the centuries—perhaps through the eons, if Lovecraft is to be credited.

Even if it were not timely, however, we would still consider ourselves more than fortunate to have for you the following analysis of/prediction for/and love song to monsters by that redoubtable monster-maker himself, Fritz Leiber. Perhaps Fritz began this piece with tongue in cheek. But as it moves along, the seriousness of his theme grows more apparent—and the role of monsters in our lives more . . . frightening?

I LIKE monsters. In fact, I *love* monsters. I mean fictional monsters such as Frankenstein's, that much misunderstood humble patchwork of humanity, seeker after truth, and lover of little children—not knowing his own strength always, yet always trying to be gentle.

I like other monsters, too, such as:

Yog-Sothoth, H. P. Lovecraft's somewhat uncheery vision of the ultimate god of gods, an inordinately fat, pustulent, churned-up being with the mindlessness of an idiot, whose only joy is listening 24 hours a lightless day to flute music with a little piccolo thrown in.

Mr. Hyde, that vastly more interesting, uninhibited, hip, fun-loving, and healthily dynamic alter ego of the pusillanimous *square* Dr. Jekyll;

Helen Vaughan, Arthur Machen's girl counterpart of Mr. Hyde, a she-satyr sneaking through the novella *The Great God Pan* and escorting innumerable men to highly colorful dooms;

Alraune, Hans Heinz Ewer's heroine, born of a modern love goddess and the last seed of a hanged murderer, who in the novel named for her did exactly the same things as Helen Vaughan;

Charles Dexter Ward, Love-

(*Continued on page 118*)

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Across the red sand loomed the fabled city of gold chariots. There were no chariots now. Only ruins . . . fear . . . myths . . . and the ghastly warning etched in . . .

THE PILLARS OF CHAMBALOR

By JOHN JAKES

WHEN the yellow-headed barbarian opened his eyes, he thought he had gone mad.

Moments passed while the wind keened, an eerie moaning in his ears. He fought back the blinding ache from a great red sun searing its light into his face. And only then did Brak recall that this was not madness. Rather, it was the product of madness; of the sand, and the wind.

Was it a day ago? Or a century? Alone, and having lost the caravan-trail over the dunes, he and his pony had been caught in one of the sudden eruptions of the breath of the sky-gods of which the men at the last caravanseri had warned him. The storm now was an evil memory. But its effect was still present, in Brak's predicament.

Brak blinked and blinked into the reddish sundown. He felt for his broadsword, discovered it still hanging at his hip. Then he rolled over. Trackless waste stretched away. The wind lifted the sand in isolated ghost-veils here and there. He saw his pony where it had fallen, jaws and eyes and ears so coated and filled, they looked like parts of some grotesque sand-sculpture. In the

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height of the storm, while the heavens blackened, the pony had broken a leg.

Brak's tongue was parched. He crawled toward the animal. He laid his palm against the pony's flank, uttered a guttural word of relief. The poor beast had borne him many a league on his long journey from the high steppes, the wild lands of the north where he had been born. The pony was dead. Brak was grateful that he would be spared slaying him.

That was all he would be spared, he knew. He was in utter isolation. He had no provender, no water. And no knowledge of where he was, except that he was lost in the middle of a vast desert whose crossing, he had been told, was only attempted by the nomads born to the country, men who had the sand's feel in their bones. And even they crossed but a relatively safe corner of the waste, which the caravanseri people said was haunted. They said the waste had once been fertile and green, ages ago, but now was cursed, and dry, and totally empty.

Still, the route had been the shortest between two kingdoms. So Brak had risked it, hurrying ahead, for he was bound to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward. Thus he had been trapped, alone, in the sudden whirlwind.

RISING, stretching the ache from his mighty body, Brak shouted:

"Hal-lo, hal-lo?"

Hal-lo, hal-lo, the emptiness thundered back. The wind piping carried the grace notes weirdly. *Lo-lo-lo-lo—*

Brak walked to the top of a dune, calf deep in sand. At the top he shouted again. This time, the cry had a different, distorted sound. A moment later he saw why. Something had interrupted the emptiness. He gaped in astonishment.

"In the caravanseri," he said to himself to assuage the piercing loneliness, "they talked of this place. I thought they were drunken sots mouthing cradle tales. It had a name." Like a thousand great gongs, the word came into his head before the word touched his tongue—

Chambalor.

"Chambalor. The City of Gold Chariots." Brak's face was pained. "Well, it's a fine burial-place."

The scene staggered him. Actually, nothing remained of the city of Chambalor except two rows of pillars stretching into the distance. Brak had seen similar, though far smaller, columns in other great cities, lining and towering above stately avenues. All else in Chambalor had been covered by the bloody-lighted sand. Yet in the reddening eve-

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ning, those pillars were magnificent, awful, and majestic because of their size.

How wide the great avenue must have been! The pillars stood, Brak judged, full a quarter of a league apart, one row from the other. He counted fifty in each row, converging into the blurred distance, before he lost track. And each pillar looked to be a hundred times as thick as a man, and fifty times as high. Up they roared, into the red sky.

And while the big barbarian could not make out precisely what was carven upon their stone surfaces, the dimly-seen decorations lent the pillars a curious, shifting look, as though the stones were subtly alive.

Angrily Brak scrubbed his sandy wrist across his eyes. Illusion! An infant's dream, not a warrior's. He was a huge, wide-shouldered man, naked save for a garment of lion's hide about his hips. A single, long yellow braid hung down his brawny back.

Fighting off his hunger and thirst, he lurched down the other side of the dune, kicking up sand-spray as he went. In the shadow of one of those awesome pillars, at least he would have protection when the night wind sharpened. Already the sun peered like a half-lidded eye, down there between the mighty twin rows of towering stone.

Some blue-veined basalt slab had been unearthed by the windstorm which had knocked him unconscious with its buffeting, Brak saw. The barbarian kicked at the rock as he went by. He had taken two more steps when ghastly, stinging pain seared his left leg.

LOOKING down, he choked. A black, obscenely hairy feeler was twisting round and round his thick, tanned leg.

Even as his fist closed over the haft of his mighty broadsword, Brak screwed his head around. No basalt slab lay there. Rather, a great, lumpish black thing with transparent veins in intricate tracery over its body. The thing came rousing up out of the sand where it had lain asleep.

Through the transparent surface veins, a milky blue fluid full of black motes pumped. Two pouches on the sides of the black monstrosity opened. Great, ghastly, pupilless white eyes stared at him. From under the central body, more feelers began to uncoil, extend. One closer around Brak's free arm. The stinging doubled.

With a roar and stir of sand, the enormous spider-like monstrosity lifted itself on spindly legs and trundled at its new enemy. A mouth yawned suddenly, giving off a wild, rhythmic *clacka-clacka-clacka.*

Hackles on his neck crawling,

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Brak sliced at the feeler constricting on his arm. The edge of his broadsword barely dented the pulpish surface. *Clacka-clacka-clacka* went the mouth. The thing had a good two dozen legs for propulsion. And twice that many feelers, all waving and questing in the dark red air. It lumbered closer to its prey.

Brak sawed hard at the tentacle. His heart thudded in his gigantic body. Taking a firmer grip on the haft of his blade, he lifted the iron over his head, brought it flashing down.

With a jerk and a lash, the feeler was cleft.

Its backlash struck Brak in the cheek. Drops of hot, sticky ichor dribbled down his chin. That ichor burned like a fire-heated iron. The pain was far worse than that from the tentacle coiled around his calf. With another great stroke, Brak sliced that tentacle in half.

The *clacka-clacka* from the creature's maw stopped. The milk-white eyes clouded to a dark pearl.

Then, with a feeble little *screee* of hurt and anguish, the monster, some preternatural thing whose fellows had long ago died off, turned and went scurrying up the side of the dune.

Although huge, it moved with surprising speed. The last Brak saw, the fearsome feelers waved against the dark sky like a nest of worms. Then the beast vanished down the other side of the dune.

Brak held his broadsword a moment longer. He feared the nightmare thing would return. He heard nothing except the wind. He rubbed at his cheek. It burned almost beyond bearing. With a moan, he dropped to his knees.

He picked up a handful of sand. He rubbed it cruelly hard across his flesh. Still the dreadful ichor-touch pained. Dizziness began to creep over him.

Had the fluid somehow been absorbed into his body, bearing its poisons to the center of his being? The two great rows of pillars of Chambalor seemed to waver, sway. Suddenly Brak wrenched over on his back with an inhuman shriek of pain.

His heels began to kick furiously. He could not stop the hurting. It increased each second. As he writhed, he knew the delusion of thinking he would be rescued —black against a distant dune, he thought he saw the humped, long-necked silhouettes of a pair of nomad dromedaries. Did the desert-bells around their necks tinkle in the distance?

Pain blotted out the hallucination. Side to side Brak rolled, everything dimming, swimming, until, with a last gasp of agony, he slid down into soothing darkness.

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NEWT'S toe. Hemp vein. Powder of sapphire—hmmm, yes. The pouch is full enough."

"This is vile business, father. To plan to bargain, haggle, when he may be dying."

"No doubt of it, daughter, he is dying. But not so swiftly as to justify your shrill accusations and handwringings. 'Twill be the fullness of the sun tomorrow at the earliest before the toxic strains blend together. Although the fluid of T'muk is fatal, 'tis also slow to work. Hmmm. I'd thought the caravan-masters had driven off the last of those creatures years ago. But I suppose since no man dares to visit Chambalor nowadays, some of the beasts still lie in their dune burrows. We only saw it from a distance, but I'm sure this hulking lout, whoever he may be, did not slay it. T'muk is still about. And wounded, 'tis even more ferocious."

Dimly Brak heard the conversation against a background of whistling wind and the crackle of a fire. He opened his eyes to a slit. The darkness lightened hardly at all. Then a fire-pattern appeared, blurred, sharpened. Against it, the speakers were visible—two figures in flowing cloaks, both small, one feminine.

A brass desert-bell tinkled. One of the humped beasts which Brak had not imagined after all blew its lips noisily.

Supressing a groan, Brak sat up.

"This place on my jaw," he said thickly. "There is much pain."

The robed man stirred, walked around the fire. The first thing Brak saw was the glitter of a silvery half-moon dagger with a bossed handle. The dagger was gripped in thin, frail fingers.

The man was incredibly old, wrapped in grimy white linens from under whose hem pointed slippers curled up. Out of his head-wrappings his face peered like a cage-prisoned monkey's, thin-lipped, heavy-nosed, with thousands of wrinkles. His pale green eyes, however, were ageless in the firelight. And though he was indeed spindly, he seemed to possess an aura of strength.

The man stood warily a few paces from Brak. He said, "Much pain there will be. And death, too. Unless I apply a poultice. I am a man of many professions, outlander. Mendicant is one, Magician apprentice is another, herbdoctor is a third. And bargainer—" With a cackling laugh, the old man bared perfect, even white teeth. "—that is my best profession."

BRAK saw that the ancient with the merciless greenish eyes indeed carried a fat pouch at his belt-cord. Upon his breast rested a gold mystic symbol, a

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radiant star-shape fastened to a link chain. The man continued:

"I will be pleased to concoct the necessary poultice, provided you lend your back and your broadsword, if need be, to an effort upon which I'm engaged." His wrinkled hand, fingernails longer than a woman's lifted. By the sickle light of a moon, Brak saw him point to the strange stone pillars of Chambalor marching into the desert dark. "Yonder."

"Who are you?" Brak snarled. "A robber captain?"

"Nay, outlander, a man of commerce," chuckled the other. "Zama Khan, by name."

"Your callousness disgusts me!" said the second person beside the fire.

Zama Khan whirled. "It was not required that you come on this journey, Dareet." Then, with a vicious crinkling of his mummy's lips, he bowed at the barbarian lying sprawled on the sand. "My daughter Dareet has been stricken by a peculiar malady, outlander. An attack of scruples."

Now full consciousness, and with it anger, returned to the yellow-haired barbarian. Before he could speak, however, the girl Dareet rushed forward. She confronted her father:

"Long and long have I followed you from one dishonest living to another, hoping to change you, hoping to soften you, and only watching you grow harder, more avaricious. But this last is too much. It was not enough that you drugged the wine of that merchant of Vishnuzin, then fled the city with those gimcrack clay tablets. Now your lust for a treasure that doesn't exist has maddened you to the point where you'll make an innocent man join in your madness or pay with his life."

"Those silver doors are mouldered with age," Zama Khan said. "We cannot open them alone."

"So this poor stranger, dying from the kiss of T'muk, must help, or you'll not help him?"

From deep in his throat Brak growled, "You are saying many things which are strange to me. Who are you? What kind of treasure are you hunting? And what is T'muk?"

LICKING his lips, Zama Khan hunkered down. He still gripped the dagger. "T'muk is the ancient name for the primitive sand-spider which attacked you. The caravan-masters know him as The Thing Which Crawls. That specimen you hacked is lurking about, I'll wager. 'Tis another reason for us to be away before the moon fully wanes."

Zama Khan ran his thumb-ball along the dagger's shining edge. Beyond the crouching man, Brak saw the face of the girl

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Dareet illuminated by the dung-chip fire. A thin, rather undernourished face. Sloe-eyed, olive in cast, and pretty, too, except for the gloss of fear upon it. The girl sensed an evil in the empty desert night. An evil larger than that in the green, heartless eyes watching Brak where he lay. What was that evil? Brak wondered.

Trying to quell his anger, Brak thought perhaps he might reason with this strange old man. He said, "While passing through your land, I've heard of this place. Chambalor. What is it you seek here?"

"First," came Zama Khan's prompt reply, "why is it that you pass through at all?"

"My name is Brak. I come from the high steppes, and I'm travelling to Khurdisan in the south."

Zama Khan snorted. "A barbarian! With no skill in letters or numbers or the magic arts. Well, stranger Brak, that matters little, I suppose. Your back is wide and roped with muscle. Pitting that back against the silver doors to the treasure-chamber, you should be able to open them. Then, with the tablets which I—ah—released from the possession of the merchant in Vishnuzin, I shall read the incantation, clearly written. I shall shatter the wizard's spell upon the ivory chest, which is sealed to a block of marble, so the tablets say. If it were not so sealed, I'd carry it off entire. The contents will go into the camel bags, and one night's work shall make up for a life of poverty. Of crawling and scraping before the nabobs."

Darett said softly, "Never until now, father, did I see you in true light. There is a twisted evil in you which nothing can untangle now."

"Be silent!" Zama Khan cried. "You're flesh of my loins, but you sicken me."

"No more than I am sickened by seeing you at last for what you are."

Once more Brak's cheek began to burn and tingle. The pain nearly doubled him. He gasped out: "You're not lying to me? There are—are medicaments in your pouch to—fix a poultice so the—monster's touch won't—be fatal?"

"That is so," answered Zama Khan. "In return, you will come with my daughter and me into the ruins. Help us force the doors."

With a small sound of disgust, Dareet turned away. Brak waited a moment longer. He wondered whether he was being skillfully gulled. Suddenly his anger flamed. Spurred by it, he whipped his hand across and wrapped his fingers around the broadsword haft.

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BREAST-CHAIN clanking Zama Khan was swifter. He leaped. The dagger flashed. Zama Khan crouched suddenly beside Brak, the flat of the blade bearing down cruelly on the barbarian's wrist, bending it enough so that it was pinned, and he could not draw the broadsword swiftly.

Though Zama Khan's teeth were perfect white, foul breath gusted from his mouth as he whispered: "Bare your iron and you'll not live to another sundown, outlander. I promise."

Quickly Brak looked at Dareet. She nodded. "He speaks truth, Brak. Though you might take the pouch from him by force, you could not mix the poultice. Nor could I."

T'muk, Brak thought. *The Thing Which Crawls*. Its poison stung his jaw-flesh, hurting, *hurting—*

"Very well," he said low. "I will try to open your silver doors. But fix the medicine first, and apply it."

Chuckling, Zama Khan stood up. He sheathed his dagger with a click. "Why, yes, friend Brak. That I will do. I have you at a disadvantage, you see. I can tell you give a promise that is kept. I know you will do what you say. While I—" Zama Khan shrugged. "—well, you must trust in me."

He lifted the flap of his pouch, took out a stone mortar, a smaller stone chipped into a rod shape, and several phials. Brak watched, simmering with fury. Zama Khan had rightly seen that, once making a bargain, Brak would stand by it. So he was immediately at a disadvantage.

Devious and wicked were the ways of the world through which he travelled to seek his fortune. The only boon Brak's agreement had gained him was a kind of sad and thankful look of relief from Dareet. She sat across the fire, starting and shivering with each whine and gust of wind.

Presently Zama Khan daubed a sticky yellowish mess upon Brak's jaw. He pressed several dry leaves against it. "Hold those in place a moment or two. 'Twill work rapidly."

That part was true, anyway. The pain soon lessened. As Zama Khan handed Brak a scrap of gray linen with which to wipe is cheek, the latter asked. "What is it you seek in Chambalor, old man? You spoke of a treasure. Surely none exists. Though I'm an outlander, I have heard the tales. Chambalor flourished generations ago, in a time almost beyond memory."

Zama Khan's greenish eyes showed pinprick reflections of the firelight. "Aye. But consider those stone pillars. Have you looked at them close-hand?"

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"No. I got no nearer than the den of T'muk."

"Then give a glance when we reach them. For on—or perhaps *in*—those pillars, frozen in damned torment, sealed in stone to live their agonies forever, are the princes and courtezans of Chambalor. The warlords and the women who once in a dim time made Chambalor the feared and savage kingdom she was."

ALMOST crooning, Zama Khan began to rock back and forth on his heels. His eyes stared off toward the obelisks rising in the moon-glare.

"She was a sink. A pit of cruelty. Of war and bestial evil, was Chambalor. And a certain very powerful—and in my opinion very foolish—wizard named Juhad cursed her, one heartbeat after the Lord of Chambalor thrust a knife in Juhad's breast because he was rabble-rousing. That curse — Juhad's spell — locked Chambalor's treasure—emeralds, piles and piles of emeralds from the mines that once flourished nearby—in an ivory chest behind silver doors. And, as punishment for what the wizard Juhad considered their depravity, the people of Chambalor were frozen in rock, thousands of them in each of the great columns along the triumphal avenue. Juhad died, they say, after he finished his last task. That was the writing of the tablets, using a stylus to mark the hardening clay. Juhad wrote the incantation which would release the tormented souls and, incidentally, the treasure one day. Though he was a wrathful man, he was also—like you, outlander—afflicted by a certain softness of heart. Punished the wretched people would be. But not for eternity. Well, Juhad's clay tablets have endured. I—ah—borrowed them, as I mentioned, from the merchant I chanced upon in Vishnuzin."

The big barbarian could not resist a snort of disbelief. "Old man, 'tis a fable."

Dareet gave a shudder. "You are wrong, barbarian. No one has plundered the treasure precisely because it *is* real. Many times, they say, others have wanted to come. Some, the awful T'muk has frightened away. Others—well, Chambalor is cursed. Not until this twisted soul who once was my father was there a man greedy enough—or mad enough—to dare at last—"

With a cry, Zama Khan struck her. Brak leaped to his feet, pulled the broadsword. Zama Khan's half-moon dagger whispered out, winked in the moon.

"I think not," he said. His evil monkey-face smiled. "A bargain is a bargain."

"Then let's be done!" Brak grumbled.

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He was convinced the old man had lost his wits. He felt sure nothing remained of Chambalor's fabled wealth except a lustful dream passed from generation to generation. But when Dareet began to weep, Brak had doubts.

Brak put his arm around the girl's shoulder. After making a sneering remark about the barbarian's solicitude, Zama Khan moved off into the dark, where a dromedary stamped.

Standing with his arm around the shaking girl, Brak realized that for the first time in his life, he actually had the desire to break his word. He wanted to go so far as to gut Zama Khan with his broadsword, from behind. The only reason that he did not was Dareet.

She was shaking violently now. She was a frail girl. He did not want to leave her alone with the green-eyed old madman, who now came back into the firelight clutching a bundle wrapped in frowsy lambskin.

Zama Khan's brown fingers trembled as he unwrapped the bundle. "These are Juhad's tablets," he breathed, his face lightly slicked with sweat, his lower lip actually trembling with expectation. "Let us put them to use. Bring your broadsword, barbarian. And the girl, if she can walk. Or, if she chooses, she can remain here."

"No!" The outcry from Dareet was sharp. "This place is accursed."

Three shadows, they set out across the dunes and soon reached the head of the buried avenue.

THE mammoth pillars towered up on either hand, black against the moon and casting blacker shadows. Brak's stomach turned over and sour bile rose in his mouth as he studied the carvings reaching to the sky.

Round and round each pillar, in endless circling friezes, the princes of Chambalor and their begirdled women were portrayed with such vividness that Brak felt thousands of damned, tormented eyes watching him.

The garments, and the appointments surrounding the figures, were splendid indeed, though they had an ancient look.

But the figures themselves—

Sickened, Brak turned away from one lower band on the first great pillar. Upon it, stone soldiers in breastplates bashed out the heads of babes by holding their ankles and swinging them. Murder, plunder, torture, lust, depravity—no vice was missing, no sin unrepresented, as figure after figure, group after group, had been caught by Juhad's curse. So many sins actually defied belief. Though he had seen much of savagery, in just a moment or so, Brak viewed many

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things of which even he had never dreamed.

The most hideous feature of all was the look upon each of the faces. Over his shoulder as he walked, Brak could see many in the moonglare. And each face showed—*torment.*

They kept trudging.

"Yonder," Zama Khan said at last, rushing ahead. Brak had already counted fifty-five pillars on his left. Now he glimpsed at least a dozen more ahead. "The last on the left was the treasure-tower," Zama Khan called. "Belowground lies the chamber."

Suddenly Brak stopped. Dareet gripped his arm. "What do you hear, barbarian?"

"Fancies," Brak whispered in reply. He scanned the dune horizon, black, silver-bathed, empty beyond the pillars. Had the wind carried a faint *clacka-clacka?*

No, he was dreaming.

AS they approached the final pillar on the left, Brak saw a dark opening in the base. Outside of this, Zama Khan waited, hands clutching tightly at the bundle. The clay tablets shone dull gray where the wrappings fell away. Stark black lines upon them were the places where a stylus had inscribed many strange, ancient symbols before the tablets hardened. All at once Brak began to *believe*—

Zama Khan was mad in his own way. But the story of Chambalor's curse might be true.

Impossible!

Then why did Brak have the uneasy feeling that beneath the stone surfaces of the carved depravities rising on every hand, a tormented, prisoned life-stuff crawled and writhed, awaiting release?

"There's tinder inside," Zama Khan whispered. "I'll strike a spark."

In a moment, he had a smoky torch going. There was a smell of decay, dust, as they hurried down a winding stair. They emerged into a wide, paved circular hall. At the far side, huge silver doors, green-blue with mold growths in their crevices, shone dully.

"The right hand one gives but a little." Zama Khan's voice was hushed, echoing. "The left not at all."

"This is wrong," Dareet was trembling. "This is wrong. And too dangerous. Father—" She seized the old man's arm. *"Why else has no one ever come before us? Because they knew—"*

"I will not be balked!" Zama Khan screamed, slashing at her with his hand. The sound of the blow was loud, sharp. Dareet fell, sobbing.

Watching Zama Khan, Brak let his thick yellow brows hook together in a ferocious scowl. The old man licked his lips.

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"The bargain," he said softly, his green eyes bright. "The bargain is to open to the doors."

Turning, Brak pushed his shoulder against the right-hand door of silver. It squealed faintly, moved hardly at all.

He braced his palms against the door, pushed harder. The muscles in his mighty shoulders and brawny arms corded, pulsed, jumped. His hands grew damp with sweat. He had to stop and wipe them on the garment of lion-hide at his waist.

He pushed harder, still harder. His forehead began to hurt.

The door opened a hand's width.

Two.

Foul, fetid air gushed out. Zama Khan's breathing was dry, intense behind him. Brak pushed with all his might. His belly muscles corded. His thews strained.

Three hand's widths.

Four.

"A little more!" Zama Khan cried, straining forward with the torch. "A little more and the bargain is accomplished."

Brak threw his whole body against the door, felt it sway, give a squeal of tortured fittings, lurch inward. Simultaneously, Dareet's scream rose up:

"Brak!"

LONG yellow braid swinging, the gigantic barbarian spun. Zama Khan had thrust the torch into a rusty iron wall bracket. The half-moon dagger blazed, arcing higher, higher, as Zama Khan's robes flowed out behind him, driven by the rush of his charge.

"I've kept my word," he was babbling, his white teeth a-shine with spittle. "The bargain is ended and only I will go through the doors to the ivory chest of—"

The whirling broadsword-blade in Brak's two hands cut off Zama Khan's words in a shower of blood, and cut off half his head, too.

For one insane instant, Brak saw the corpse still alive. It wobbled before him on its curl-toed slippers, the light of treachery dying in its green eyes as its head hung half-severed on its neck. Then Zama Khan's robes were showered with the blood that fountained up and out of his neck. His hands opened and he dropped the half-moon dagger and the tablets of Juhad.

The clay tablets smashed apart.

The light that followed the clap of noise when the tablets broke was white as lightning, searing-white. Brak was hurled back against the wall. Dareet shrieked wildly. Beyond the silver door standing half open, that blazing brilliance bloomed. An ivory chest that had been fused upon a stone block became a billow of smoking thunder.

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Green flowers grew in the radiance, then crumbled and fell apart in mid-air, dripping down like green rain. Shaking with terror, Brak stumbled across the antechamber. The very foundations of the great pillar began to rock. The very air seemed to swirl and darken with a rush of wind.

Then, from somewhere, a ghastly screaming chorus of thousands upon thousands of cursed, condemned souls began to wail and howl.

"The place will collapse," Brak yelled, seizing Dareet's thin arm, dragging her along toward the stairs, pulling her upward. "The shattered tablets broke the curse. But they must have broken something more, because—"

Milk-white and round, great eyes stared at Brak from the head of the stairs.

BENEATH the surfaces of the transparent veins twisting obscenely over the humped body of T'muk, pale blue liquids flowed and pulsed. *Clacka-clacka-clacka* went the mouth. Two of its feelers dangling useless, The Thing Which Crawls came limping downward toward the enemy who had hurt it.

"Back, girl!" the big barbarian cried. "Hide at the bottom—"

"The pillar is shaking—the earth is trembling—" Dareet moaned.

"Go!" Brak bawled. "There is no other way out of—"

Clacka-clacka-clacka.

The Thing Which Crawls came down and around on the stairs, its vile body jammed between the walls, its feelers waving. Brak charged up half a dozen steps, raised the broadsword over his head. Then cold pit-terror claimed him.

Bring the blade down upon a feeler—cut one of the thing's evil worm-like, lashing arms—and the ichor would flood again.

Zama Khan was dead.

And only Zama Khan knew how to mix the healing poultice.

Brak was wracked with the agony of uncertainty.

Clacka-clacka-clacka-clacka.

From out of time, from a forgotten world, T'muk came squeezing and oozing and crawling down the stairs while Brak retreated a step, another, shaking with weariness and desperation.

If he died, the girl Dareet would die as well.

He reached the bottom of the stair again. The base of the pillar rocked. The awful chanting, moaning, had intensified now. It sounded from above ground.

There was one chance. One chance, and he must gamble it. Brak could use the weapon only this way.

He closed his right hand midway along the cruelly sharp sword blade. Closed his fingers

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and bit his lips until blood ran because the sword-edge sliced so deep. But he could get a grip no other way.

Then, drawing back his right arm, he threw the sword, spear fashion, feeling his own bloodied palm slide away as the iron sailed straight and hard.

And buried haft-deep in the right eye of The Thing Which Crawls.

Clackaclackaclacka, clackaclackaclacka—

The mouth pulsed frantically. The hairy crawling legs twitched. Brak stumbled down to where Dareet crouched. He shielded her with his own sweat-streaked, bloody body. His right hand was running raw with gore as T'muk the ancient thrashed and heaved and died, jammed into the stair.

Brak whispered shakily, "Now —we must climb up and over. There—is only a little ichor leaking from the eye. We can pass it safely."

But as they climbed the stair, the stench of the dead creature reached them. Dareet gave a long, struggling cry and went limp. Brak slung her over his shoulder.

HE tried to keep his mind clear to concentrate on what he was doing. He planted a foot on the hideous, black-haired hump of the dead monster. Gripping other tufts, he began to climb.

Once he slipped.

Sobbing, he hung on, his foot shaking and trembling, just the width of a finger from slipping into the gleaming ichor-track that leaked down out of the skewered eye.

Slowly, with all the strength in his mighty body, he controlled that one trembling leg. Pulled it up and away. Leaving the broadsword where it was, he kept climbing.

Outside, there was maelstrom.

The wind had risen. Great dark clouds of sand whipped past in the night, stinging his face. Brak tried to walk. His body was pushed into an oblique angle by the force of the storm which he somehow knew was not like the storm which had felled him earlier. The winds blew black, palpable, whirling round and round each of the great pillars, then rising up toward the sky in train after smoky train of coruscating, writhing life-stuff. And within these cloud-paths, awful human shapes twisted, turned, moaned, moaned, *moaned—*

Carrying Dareet in his arms, Brak the barbarian staggered as far as the end of the avenue before the wind and the blinding sand and the awful ascending moans weakened his body and mind and hurled him senseless to the earth.

* * *

At dawn, his hacked hand linen-bound, Brak ventured once

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more into the treasure-house pillar to fetch the body of Zama Khan.

Peering into the treasure room, he saw nothing except bare, mouldering block walls. In the center of the floor, a scattering of ivory chips lay among green emerald-dust. The treasure was no more.

Returning to the campsite, he helped Dareet bury the old man. Because she professed no religion, he fashioned a crude Nestorian cross from bits of a cooking-stick and placed it in the blowing sand over the mound.

Dareet stood with head down. Brak wiped his mouth. He was heavy with guilt.

"My sword killed him," he rumbled. "I—I am sorry."

"It makes no difference." The girl's voice was empty. "We must leave."

"The beasts will carry us." Brak was still tortured. "Girl—I had to kill him."

"It makes no difference," she repeated. "He was evil. The greed that drove him to come here, where no sane man would come, made him a stranger to me long ago. He was not my father." But despite her words, she began to weep, shuddering in her sorrow.

At length Brak put his arm around her. "Girl? It has just come to me. The dark gods have strange ways. Your father came here to plunder. Yet the breaking of the tablets released thousands of tormented sufferers from the prison where the wizard's spell cast them. Though he never intended it, your father freed them from their pain and ended their bondage. Surely—surely that is something for which to honor him. All men must be honored in some way."

The wind whistled, keened in the silence.

"Dareet? I speak the truth. You can see it. Look. You must look."

She did, seeing for perhaps the first time that the mighty pillars of Chambalor, standing in the blinding white desert sun, were bare.

Bare of ornament, the figures gone.

Slowly Dareet's eyes cleared. Wearily she lifted one hand.

"Yes. I see. He—freed them. It is something. We—we must see to the beasts."

In an hour, Brak and the girl and the dromedaries were gone beyond the horizon.

THE END

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MARY, MARY

By JOHN BALDWINSON

From the far corners of the universe

she gathered the plants for her garden . . .

little thinking how they would grow.

IN those days, most people worked for fifteen years and then retired happily on what the State gave them, but you could add to that if you wanted to. When Martha Jonson started working with the Seven Planets Building Society in 2545 she started paying the highest possible contributions into its Employee Home and Pension Plan and she kept it up clear through 2560. Some of her friends scoffed at her for it.

"Why mortgage the present for the sake of an uncertain future?" one asked her.

But Martha had never been uncertain about the future. When her friends jetted away or blasted off on holidays she could not afford she just smiled, like she did when they bought their star-silk clothes and their sun-jewel necklaces. Sometimes, at her desk in the Seven Planets building, she would use her little computer to tot up her mounting contributions. Then, in her mind, she would lay out her plans once again.

"A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot," she would quote sometimes.

Martha was going to buy a piece of land where it was quiet and sunny and where the soil was black and rich and she was going to make a garden that would be a poet's dream and a

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king's envy. That would be all her holidays and silk clothes and necklaces, and it would be cheap at the price.

"Look at her," friends said despairingly sometimes. "At her age. All she's interested in is botany and space-travel." But they didn't know the way her garden was going to be.

She'd have some Earth flowers too, of course. Sitting at her desk dreaming, fifteen and then ten and then five years ahead, she could see them plainly. Hibiscus and frangipani and passion fruit and the wild orchids that grow in secret places in the Himalayas, she would have all those.

But the flowers that men brought back from the stars were flowers to steal your breath and your heart away from you the first time you saw them. Reds beyond blood and blues beyond skies, greens to hurt your eyes and wild, wild purples to set you dreaming.

So fifteen years passed in the life of Martha Jonson, fifteen years in the two worlds of her work and her garden-to-be. No time for love. All of her love was for the flowers, and there was none left over for any rootless man. It was fifteen years preparation for her real life.

ON the exact day that the time was up, she retired. She'd have timed it to the minute if she could. Because it had been pleasant enough as a daytime life, she cried just a little when her friends gathered round and sang, "Happy leaving to you," and presented her with a set of matching luggage.

"You're bound to go travelling now," they decided, "so we bought you this."

Martha smiled mistily and thanked them and took it home and never even thought of using it once.

She drew every cent of her money out of the Pension Plan.

"We have some very good schemes," they told her, worrying a little. "You could have a smaller sum now and *so* much a month." But she just smiled again and shook her head.

She had a good acre of black topsoil to buy, and a dome to put over it, and climate-controls, and then she had to buy plants from the stars and they were going to be very, very expensive.

Soon no one at Seven Planets remembered her at all. It was that kind of place, full of people like that. But that was all right. Martha did not remember them.

* * *

When at last she had spent it all, she looked around her and found that it was good. The soil was deep and it smelled good and it crumbled in her hands as rich and moist as birthday cake. There was grass and a spinney

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of pine under her dome, and lacy ferns that were cool to walk through.

One side was hotter than tropical summers, the other as cool as a far-North spring. Bang in the center stood Martha's house, not that she needed one. In her garden it only rained when and where she wanted, and when she said stop it stopped. She felt just a little like a flower-loving God.

Oh, the flowers . . .

She had one from Sirius formed like a statue, an iris like a perfect little Virgin in a robe that was sea and sky and all the blues that Martha had ever seen.

A rose from the Pleiedes that was a tiny infinity, a disappearance of ever-smaller cupped hands, one inside the other as far as she could see and whole worlds farther.

Spring flowers from Centauri in colors so far from the spectrum she could only feel their warmth.

Little winter blooms from the ice-caps of Mars, late autumn flowers from a planet of Proxima, and blossoms that became fruit that were bread and meat and all that she would ever need.

Oh, Martha had planned her garden well. In fifteen years you can plan and revise and re-plan and revise until you reach a perfection denied to those in more of a hurry. There were worlds without number to choose from, and whatever might happen she had the plant for it.

She had walking plants from clear across the galaxy. She kept two kinds standing near the house, each with a plot of soil to stick its big pointy root into at night. There were two big strong ones that could lift heavy weights with their arm-branches. These had the brains of, say, puppies. And there was the policeman plant, with the mind of a well-trained guard-dog. What it loved to do was sniff at things and watch doors and creak threateningly—it couldn't bark, poor thing—at anything strange.

She had a hundred different plants for food alone. Not the Earth kind of food plants, the kind you cruelly pull up or cut down, but plants with fruit that dropped in plenty and they *wanted* you to take it. As she walked along a twig would touch her and a meal would be offered to her silently. She could feel the love that was offered with it and the gratitude if she accepted it.

Almost all the plants could think and feel.

She even had a healing plant, a silver-blue willow from a far star. If you had an ache or a pain you lay under the tree and closed your eyes. Soon a million tiny filaments came down. Gently, so that all you could feel was relief, they went deep into the

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hurt place and whatever the hurt was it went away. Perhaps the healing willow took the pain to bear itself. It was lovely but a sad-looking tree.

So, all day and every day, Martha walked and worked and rested in her garden wherein all that she could see was good. She loved her plants in her warm human way, and looked after them well. They loved her back, quietly, greenly, and wished her well too. Perhaps, if she had known the name, she might have called it Eden . . .

BUT if there was no sign of evil in her little world, still there was something missing. For all the time she had devoted to making her plans, and for all the care she took in revising them, Martha had forgotten one thing.

Even in the farthest world that man has been to, there is no such thing as a talking plant. As weeks became months and the ebb and flow of the seasons carried a year or two away, Martha grew lonely for one thing: the sound of a voice beside her own.

The plants knew well enough that something was wrong. She could feel their dim green love reaching out to her whenever she felt particularly low, and in return she loved them all the more for it, but it was not the same thing at all.

Finally she walked round the whole garden and told them she was going away for a day or two. They would still be looked after, she assured them. Their water and nutrients could be piped here and there just as easily as she could carry them. She could dial the weather a week in advance just as well as she could do it each morning. It was only her visits they would have to miss, and it wouldn't be for long.

"How can I love you and look after you properly if I'm plain *unhappy* half the time?" she asked them.

One or two of the more sensitive flowers allowed their petals to droop just a little, but Martha was firm.

"It's none of your fault, and none of my own either, unless you'd blame me for being human," she said. "All I want's a little talk, that's all."

So she went away for her day or two, and when she came back she brought with her a man.

THE plants did not know what to make of him. They had grown so used to Martha alone, her touch and the whole sense of her, that they drew away warily from this stranger. The policeman plant that Martha had told to look after the garden—it wasn't going to let the man in at all, no matter who he came with, until Martha spoke to it sharply, and

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even then its branches dragged in protest.

Still, it was only a short visit, this first. The man stayed most of that day, just walking round with Martha, listening and looking and admiring. Some of the plants drew back from him, some touched him gently with frank curiosity. Mostly they stayed very still and quiet.

Whatever they felt about him, Martha was thrilled.

"His name is Jorge Dansk," she told the plants excitedly after he'd gone. "A retired spaceman, an officer, no less! And he lives on a boat on the river over there—"

She waved vaguely to somewhere outside the dome.

"—and I met him in a coffee shop and you know what? I think he's lonely too."

She chattered on about him as she worked round the plants for the next few days.

"When do you think I should invite him next?" she asked the Sirius statuette. "You're looking very nice these days, but if we waited a while and made autumn for the Proximas . . ."

"Do you think he'd like this?" she asked, eating her pudding and talking to the plant that gave it. It was a soft fruit like rhubarb custard. "Some people mightn't, you know . . ."

"You really must behave better next time," she scolded the watchful walker. "After all, love me, love my policeman plant, you know, and it really ought to work the other way too . . ."

Love? she wondered to herself. Well, why not? Most folk had had it sooner, she knew, but maybe she and Jorge were two late flowerers.

She went on a courtesy call to see his boat, and unaccountably stayed two nights. Next time he came to see the garden, he stayed in the house at the dome's very center for three.

Once, after lunch on a sunlit bank on the summer side, he had taken her in his arms and started saying nice things to her. But after a moment she pulled back.

"No, Jorge," she said reluctantly. She looked round at some of the nearer plants. "Not here."

But plants don't get everywhere, and soon they had got into habits they both liked. For a while they would live in the garden, and then one day Martha would set the climate-controls to automatic and she would tell the policeman plant to be on his guard and she would dial a program for the water and nutrients and then she and Jorge would go to the boat and perhaps sail off somewhere for a week or two.

She thought she was the luckiest woman in the world, to have such a perfect man and two perfect homes. She and Jorge were very, very happy.

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But the plants were not happy at all.

None of the plants were very intelligent, but some had sharper minds than others. Brightest of them all was the lovely blue iris, the Virgin of Sirius. In the quiet passing of time in the garden she had learned a lot about her water and nutrients, and where they came from, and she had learned something about Martha too. In her cool blue-green way she had been thinking about Martha and the man Jorge ever since he first came to the garden.

Martha used to be here all the time, the flower thought. Martha brought the man here.

Now she goes away with him and she stays away longer each time.

Therefore, the flower thought, with all the logic of her cold, white fixed-star home, therefore it is the man that is taking her away, and one day she will not come back.

It was as simple as that.

The language of plants is not a thing that humans can learn. It is made of trembling twigs and leaves, and pulses in the green sap, and little waves that run through the soil from one root to another. But it is enough for plants. The next time the policeman plant lumbered by, the blue iris spoke to it.

You. Listen.

The big plant slowed and stopped, and put its big root into the soil.

Yes?

This is so that you will know I speak the truth.

The blue iris told what she had learned about the pipes that fed the plants when Martha was not there. Simply and clearly the small flower told the big plant how to follow the pipes and how to turn this thing and push that thing to control what flowed along them. The policeman plant went and did what she said and so it learned that she spoke the truth.

When it came back, its obedient mind was ready to accept anything she said.

That man, the blue iris said. *He is bad.*

The big plant remembered its own dislike and distrust. *Yes!*

So we must kill him, the beautiful flower said simply. *When they come back, do this and this* . . . Tell the others. Then she *will stay here always.*

The big policeman plant could not follow all of the logic, but he knew that what he was told was right. He went round all the plants in the garden, and then they all waited. Plants are very good at waiting. No time is too long for a plant to wait.

When Martha and Jorge came back they found the dome and the lovely flowers and everything

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else exactly as they had left them. The first thing they did was eat a meal.

"I FEEL sleepy," Martha said uncertainly. Jorge tried not to show that he did too.

"Perhaps it's the sun, honey," he said. He tried to remember when he had felt this before.

"I don't know," she said, "I've never—never—been—"

The garden was spinning round her, and she sat down. She tried to get up again, and fell back.

"No use—" she said thickly, and then she was on the ground and her eyes were closed.

As Jorge tried to crawl nearer to her, he remembered why the feeling was familiar. Years ago once, in some spaceport, he was given a drink and when he came round all his money was gone.

And then the mists thickened and settled round him as well.

Some plants can take what elements they choose from the soil round their roots—seeking this one, rejecting that one, mixing and blending and directing the elements as they like, so that an ordinary fruit or the scent of an ordinary flower can become a medicine or a drug or even a poison.

The plant from which they had eaten knew how to do that, and now it sent for the policeman plant. When it came it had two of the strong lifting plants with it.

The drug in the food had not been too strong, and they left Martha sleeping on the grass. Clumsily, sometimes dropping him, they carried Jorge away.

They took him to the shed where the nutrients were kept, where they were mashed into liquid and pumped out when they were needed. On the way there they passed the blue iris.

Remember, she said. *He is mine.*

When Martha woke up she felt very confused. Hadn't there been something—someone—? One thing she knew for certain, she had a very bad headache. She got up and stumbled towards the silver-blue willow, the sorrowful healing tree.

"My head hurts," she told it fretfully, and lay down in its shade. The tree knew just what do do.

Gently, sadly, it reached to her and felt its way deep into her troubled mind. When she woke up again there was no more headache, and no memory of Jorge, and no idea of ever leaving the garden again.

THE blue iris saw how easy it had been. She was proud, with her statuette flower a new and more beautiful blue than ever before as the rich, rich liquid sank into the soil and she drank

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it greedily through her roots.

"How gorgeous you look these days, lady iris," Martha said, and the flower knew that what it had done was good.

But there came a day when the new rich nutrients were finished, and on that day the flower thought:

There is no need for her, for I can keep this garden just as well myself.

So once more the strong lifting plants staggered into the shed with their burden, while the policeman plant watched anxiously to see that his new mistress' orders were properly executed. And after that there was more richness for her to drink.

Now the brightest of the sweet-scented flowers stand near a door in the dome where, just sometimes, someone will pass by and see them and wander in.

There is a friendly policeman plant that holds the door temptingly open, and near this door too there grows the most beautiful blue flower that was ever seen in this world.

Everyone that ever comes in stands for a while in homage to Our Lady of the Dog-Star, before coming in to eat fruit and perhaps to sleep in the shade.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

The main worlds of the Web—that infinite timeline that connects the alternate universes in Keith Laumer's cosmos—find that they are not alone in space or time. Laumer's exciting new novel, The Other Side of Time, begins in the next issue of FANTASTIC.

April FANTASTIC goes on sale at all newsstands on March 18.

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Something kooky was going on in the Empire State Building. As far as Army Security and the C.I.A. were concerned, it was a hell of a lot more explosive than even . . .

102 H-BOMBS

By THOMAS M. DISCH

TWENTY-seven orphans were cleaning their M-1 rifles in C-Company barracks, while the twenty-eighth read to them from the September issue of G.I. Jokes, a comic book issued by the United States Army.

"I'll kill ya, ya skunks!" he read, imitating as best his pre-adolescent baritone could the voice of Drillmaster Grist at a Friday night war game. "So he lops this grenade. . . ." (Explaining the pictures) ". . . . into their trench. BAROOM! Up shoots that slob's head, like a Snark XVIII."

The twenty-seven orphans chuckled quietly without interrupting their work or even lifting their eyes from the gun metal to see the half-smile twisting Charlie C-Company's face. (Charlie had acquired his last name when the typist that had made out his induction papers got its wires crossed, and since Charlie didn't care particularly *what* he had for a last name he hadn't bothered to have it corrected. Nobody called him by his last name anyway.) It was not the decapitation that amused him; it was the stupidity, the stupendous stupidity, of the other C-Company orphans. His smile had actually much more to do with pain than with amusement. For stupidity riled him, and comics bored him—even when he made up the stories himself. His own stories bored him as much as the ones in the comics.

"But there's still this one Commie that ain't quite dead, and Sargeant Rock jumps down in the trench and starts to kick him . . ." He was improvising now, and Grist's nasal twang

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was more than ever evident in his voice.

Grist's own voice boomed out over the loudspeaker: "Okay, C-Company, cut out that laughing and polish those rifles! We've got a war to fight. And you—CC 743-22, report to the Drillmaster's Office. On the double!"

Charlie buttoned his little fatigue jacket and tucked it into his khaki pants as he raced out of the barracks and across the muddy yard of Camp Overkill. He did the required ten chin-ups at the bar before the Drillmaster's door, then, adjusting his expression to the S.O.P. mask of terrorized inexpressiveness, he knocked and came to attention before the closed door.

And stood there.

Make them worry: that was Grist's motto. Most of the cadets (the word *orphan* was out-of-bounds at Camp Overkill) could not take more than ten minutes of looking at Grist's door. Then they'd knock again—which was what Grist wanted.

But Grist wouldn't get at Charlie that easily. For one thing, the cadet knew that the knock wasn't even necessary. The chin-up bar triggered a bell on Grist's desk—which was how he always knew if you'd done ten. Grist knew that Charlie had seen through this and other of his deceits, and it aggravated the bad feelings between them —as Charlie had hoped it would. For Charlie's sole ambition since arriving at Camp Overkill had been to drive Drillmaster Grist mad. That was why, for two years, he had been C-Company's model cadet.

While he waited, Charlie imagined ways to use the chin-up bar to trigger a mine in Grist's office. He imagined Grist's head, decapitated by the force of the explosion (BAROOM!), sailing out over the Camp's parade ground. Like a Snark XVIII. But he didn't smile. He stood rigidly at attention, his face a perfect mask, twelve years old.

"Enter and report," Grist barked from behind the door. It had taken a mere four minutes!

Charlie entered and came to attention before Grist's desk. The Drillmaster sat there, his thin lips clipped in a mirthless smile about a dead cigar. He was a short man. A nervous, unhappy man. Charlie always imagined an ulcer pinned neatly into the fruit salad over Grist's breast pocket. The ulcer would match the color of his face.

"CC 743-22 reporting for duty, sir." His heels clicked. His arm locked into a salute.

"At ease, 743."

He dropped the salute and stood rigidly at ease, his eyes fixed on Grist's lean face as on a basilisk. He knew there was someone else in the room, and he

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also knew that outsiders often disapproved of the Camp's strenuous discipline. He became an utter robot.

"I said—*At ease!*"

"Yes *sir!*" He shifted his weight imperceptibly.

"This," Grist said in the cracked bass voice that suited his scant frame so ill, "is Miss Appleton. Miss Appleton is an agent of Talent-Hunt, with whom I understand you have been corresponding."

CHARLIE turned to the woman. She was younger than Mrs. Bunkle, the matron in charge of him at the orphanage before Overkill, and she was nicer, that was easy to see. And she wore no uniform, not even Civil Defense greys. Thinking quickly, Charlie substituted a bow for the salute he had begun.

She smiled, and her smile was not usual. "I'm very glad to meet you, Charlie. We never know what our winners are going to be like, so I was very pleased to hear from Sargeant Grist that you're an exemplary cadet and a good student."

Charlie stared at her blankly, holding his panic in check until he knew just how Grist was going to take this. Of course, he wouldn't really know that until Miss Appleton had left.

"You *have* been informed of the prize?"

"My prize?" Charlie queried.

"Of course you've been informed, boy. I informed you last week."

"I've been informed, Miss Appleton."

"He's excited. That explains it," Grist said with a smile that only Charlie would interpret as malignant.

(*Maybe,* Charlie thought, *the bar could trigger an incendiary bomb under the floorboards.*)

"Well then," said Miss Appleton brightly, "I won't have to explain how much our organization appreciated Charlie's clever little essay. Mr. Maximast, our Director, was quite impressed with the originality of the idea. And he's anxious to meet the author."

"Charlie here," Grist whispered without glancing at Miss Appleton, "is a clever little cadet. Yessirree!" Grist had never called him Charlie before, and in his mouth it sounded like a condensation of all ill will.

Charlie damned the day he'd ever seen the comic book with the Talent-Hunt ad on the back cover. He damned Appleton and Maximast. And he worried lest Grist would see how happy the news had made him.

"How did you ever think of such a novel idea, Charles?"

"It just came to me." That was the God's-truth: it had come when he was lying in bed just

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after lights out. He saw it standing there, just as he had seen it in pictures in magazines, so tall, and, miraculously, untouched by the blasts that had destroyed nearly everything else about it. It stood there monolithic in the midst of trees and the giant honeysuckle.

Then he saw it lift. It hung poised a few feet over the parkland while it built up force and then rose out of sight. A quarter-mile high, stone spaceship.

So the Talent-hunt essay on "What I Would Do If I Owned the Empire State Building" had been no trouble at all. It wrote itself. The only part of it that still surprised him was that he had dared to mail it in, but at the time it seemed that he just had to.

Because of the first prize.

"My prize?" he asked, feeling a ghost of the courage he had mustered the day he mailed his entry.

"Why, it's all taken care of. You tied for First, but the prize will be just as announced. You —and your guardian—will have a week in New York New as a guest of Talent-Hunt. And there's the scholarship money. And naturally a little something to cover your guardian's expenses."

Grist harumphed.

"In New York New you'll be able to meet all the *other* clever boys and girls who won. There are a hundred and two of them, all told. One for every floor of the Empire State Building."

"Peachy," said Grist.

(*If I owned the Empire State Building,* Charlie thought, *I would fill it with hydrogen bombs—one hundred and two hydrogen bombs. Then—*)

Miss Appleton laughed, a dainty bell-like laugh. "Oh, you *will* jest, Captain!"

(*Captain!* Charlie thought. *Captain! That was good.*)

"He *does* worry on your account, you know. His first concern was that the trip to New York New would interfere with your schoolwork. To be sure, it is a thousand miles away, and you must be very fond of this lovely camp, but the Captain will be able to help you with your lessons, as I pointed out. And he agreed to let the final decision up to you." She paused dramatically.

"We'll go," said Charlie C-Company. "Thank you very much, Miss Appleton, for the opportunity. And thank you, *Captain.*"

"Then it's decided. Miss Appleton—it's been a pleasure." Grist extended his hand. Even in elevated shoes he was two inches shorter than the Talent-Hunt agent.

Miss Appleton offered her hand to Charlie, and his resolute

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formality was no match for her conspiratorial wink. He smiled.

"Till Friday, gentlemen. And now, good evening."

"Victory," said Grist. But she was already out the door.

"If it had been up to me, this would've never happened. But they contacted Captain Langer first and told him it'd be good publicity for Overkill, so you've got him to thank. I suppose you think you're pretty smart, 743."

"No sir."

"Don't disagree with me."

"Yes sir."

There was an abyss of boredom and apathy behind the Drillmaster's inflexible military mask that Charlie did not dare to look into.

"See to it," Grist said.

(*See to what?* Charlie wondered.) He said: "Yes sir."

"Dismissed."

CC 743-22 saluted and did an about-face.

"743."

"Yes sir?"

"How many chin-ups did you do coming in here?"

"Ten, sir."

"You're getting soft. Make it fifteen from now on."

"Yes sir."

"Dismissed."

THE United States was not, officially, at war, and to maintain itself in this condition cost it the greatest of exertions and thirty thousand casualties per annum for a period of approximately twenty years. No one knew exactly when the non-war had begun.

The total resources of the nation had been mobilized long since, and now the C.I.A. and the Army, the two great rival powers in Washington politics, vied in the invention of desperate expedients. Perhaps the most desperate of these had been the Army's militarization of orphan homes (of which, in consequence of the non-war, there were many).

The first graduating class of orphans had just been sent to fight in Iceland, and so successful had they been that the Army was trying now to force the passage of the controversial Mannheim Act, which would initiate the compulsory military training of *all* boys over ten years old. As the Army public relations office had pointed out —the years from ten to fourteen were crucial in the formation of a boy's character. Too often it was impossible to instill a true military ethos into a youth once he had already reached high school. The military academy was a venerable tradition in the United States, and it was only fair that all young men should have the opportunity to share in this tradition.

True, even at the age of ten,

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some children were of so independent a disposition that it was already too late to mold an ideal soldier. Charlie C-Company was such a one. For these, military training would have to begin at birth, but as yet only the boldest dreamers in the Pentagon looked forward to that degree of universal military training.

Yet, if it were not for the lamentable independence of Charlie C-Company's private thoughts, he would have been as nearly ideal as any cadet at Overkill. His psychometric tests showed him to possess a great leadership potential and recommended O.C.S. His deportment and carriage on the drillground were flawless. His classwork was sometimes a little too good, despite his constant effort to hold his curiosity and intelligence in check. He was well-liked by the other cadets and unquestioningly obedient to his superiors.

Grist hated his guts. Perhaps one of the reasons Grist so particularly hated his guts was that essentially they were not unlike his own. A little tenderer, perhaps. And Grist had learned, in twenty years of soldiering, to despise his own guts heartily. That was what made him such an excellent noncom.

Usually life at Camp Overkill was structured so that both Charlie's and Grist's feelings never had to come out into the open, but now as they boarded the jet for New York New, they found themselves in circumstances for which Overkill's code of behavior had not prepared them. Thus, as they took their seats, Grist muttered "Smart punk!" Something he would have never said at Overkill, as he was quick to realize.

"Well, 743," Grist said, in an effort to regain his composure, "we're going to start using that smartness of yours around Overkill. When we get back from our vacation trip, you're going to be my orderly. We'll make a soldier out of you yet, 743. What do you say to that?"

"Yes sir." He felt largely indifferent about it, in fact, for he was already wondering how hard it would be to get lost among New York New's three million people.

The jet took off and for a few happy minutes Charlie watched the cloudbanks rolling past beneath them pinkly. As soon as the NO SMOKING light went off, Grist lit one of his smelly cigars. The hostess came to tell him not to smoke.

"There's no law says a man in uniform can't enjoy a smoke when he's paid good money for his ticket, and there's other people smoking."

"The lady two rows back particularly asked—"

"If the lady two rows back

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don't like the smell, she can hold her nose."

Charlie, resenting Grist no more nor less than usual, was astonished to hear, from further back in the plane a *giggle* that grew louder and louder. It was certainly a child's giggle, a girl's —and she was laughing at Grist. He felt his own laughter welling up. How long had it been since he had felt that?

Grist was turning as red as the ulcer Charlie always imagined for him, and Charlie had to close his eyes to concentrate on not laughing. He thought of the Empire State Building. The image of that was still sharply etched in his memory. He thought very hard.

The giggling from the back of the plane stopped, and the image of the great building trembled in his mind as though an earthquake had struck its foundations.

He opened his eyes.

Standing there in the aisle was a girl of about his own age. Her eyes were still tearing with laughter—golden eyes with dark, irregular flecks in them. As they stared at each other, she grew more sober. She ignored Grist completely.

"Are you going to New York New?" the girl asked.

Charlie nodded.

"Are you a winner of the Talent-Hunt?"

He nodded again. Though he had heard both questions distinctly, he had not seen her lips move.

"So am I," the girl went on. "My name is Linda. Linda van Eps. Tell me your name. . . . No, don't *say* it. Just think it to me, the way you thought the picture of the building to me."

"Charlie C-Company."

"That's the silliest name I ever heard. I have to go back to my seat now, but we can keep talking all the way to New York New. Secretly—that's the nice thing about thinking. It's always a secret."

Charlie nodded once more, and the girl, Linda, went away.

"What in God's name was that?" Grist asked. He looked shaken. He had stubbed out the cigar in the ashtray.

"I don't know, sir." Camp Overkill had taught Charlie to lie convincingly.

Tell me about yourself, Linda's voice bade. She was sitting by a window, looking at the rolling, pink clouds. Charlie could see them through her eyes. She was near-sighted. Charlie looked at the clouds through his own eyes, and Linda gasped. He felt the thrill of her discovery.

I'm an orphan, he said.

So am I, her mind replied. The two thoughts melted into one.

NOTHING in Charlie's brief, bleak history had lead him to

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suppose himself a telepath, though neither had he bothered to suppose himself otherwise. He knew that such things might be, though probably they weren't. And during the three hours they were in flight (it was not an express), Charlie was too busy being shocked by Linda's bold opening of her mind to him to be shocked at the knowledge that *he* was a telepath.

It seemed so natural. Natural, that he should be this intimate with her body, that she should know his; natural, that she should see what Grist meant to him, and that he should feel her shock at the force of his feelings (he had not known they *were* so forceful); natural, that he should remember afternoons years before when he had played with her twin brother, and especially that crucial afternoon when Linda had stood by helplessly while her brother drowned, and she felt his every anguish in her own mind. Charlie had never known grief: how terrible it was!

How beautiful it was and how natural to walk through her mind as he would walk through a city or through an unfamiliar house, free to gawk at all the foreigners —to look into all the closets.

For instance, *she* actually liked cauliflower!

And liver!

And she knew French. She knew so many things he didn't know—despite all the books he had read in secret. Her vocabulary was enormous—and entirely at his disposal. It was as though his brain had suddenly doubled. *It had.* It was like (and this thought came to both simultaneously, so complete was their rapport now) coming into a room lit by only a 25-watt bulb and turning on a 200-watt overhead.

Quite suddenly, each of them knew that they had fallen deeply in love. There was no doubt in either mind, or in both of them.

Linda? Charlie said.

Yes?

Will you marry me?

Yes oh yes.

Linda blushed. Charlie had never understood what it meant to blush.

Someday, she added. They had forgotten they were only twelve.

"Hey, boy. I said *Hey!*"

Charlie looked up at the Drillmaster, who had spread his briefcase on his lap and was dealing out cards.

"Let's play a couple hands of poker, boy. I'm getting bored just sitting."

"I don't know how."

"Don't hand me any of that. I've heard you in the barracks, bluffing those stupid kids. You must have them so deep in the hole they'll be shining your shoes and polishing your rifle till next Christmas." Grist chuckled.

Reluctantly, Charlie picked up

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a handful of cards. Linda nudged into his mind. *Teach me how to play,* she said. That made it better again.

Grist had dealt him a full-house. "Let's play for money," Charlie said.

"Sure," Grist replied. He chuckled. *The little shark,* he thought. For, while Charlie had sat there bleary-eyed in love, Grist had fixed the deck and dealt himself four aces.

BY the time the jet landed at Grand Central (it was, of course, a vertical jet), Charlie had, with Linda's help, lost $430: $250 on the first hand, and the rest in dribs and drabs.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait to be paid," Charlie said proudly as he unfastened his seat belt. "I only have ten dollars in cash. If you'll accept an I.O.U. I can . . ."

"No hurry, sport. Just so as I get it sometime. Hell, maybe you can *win* it back."

"Really!" said a voice from the aisle. The elderly woman, whose voice it was, avoided Grist's inquiring glance as though it were dirty and tightened her grip on Linda's hand. *My aunt Victoria,* Linda explained. *She saw him playing poker with you, and I guess she heard about the money. I don't like her.*

Grist elbowed his way into the aisle ahead of the old woman and pulled Charlie to the exit. At the foot of the ramp stood Miss Appleton, more civilian than ever: a sort of filmy pink fluff revealed the more substantial pinkness of Miss Appleton herself beneath. Braided into her thick red hair was a green velvety rope dotted with dull-yellowish stones like peridots. Seeing her again made Charlie feel better.

"You're the very last, my dears. All the rest are waiting to say hello."

"I thought you said there was going to be photographers and television cameras and stuff," Grist complained. "As far as I'm concerned, the whole purpose of coming here is to get some good publicity for Camp Overkill."

"Ah yes," Miss Appleton replied vaguely. "It is difficult, what with the war effort and all —and you did arrive so late. . . . Linda! my darling!"

Aunt Victoria, like Grist in this, always chose to answer anything addressed to her charge. "My good Miss Appleton! What a lovely *frock!*" She couldn't speak a complete sentence without giving the impression that she had herself invented at least one of the words in it.

"Have you all been introduced?" Grist and Aunt Victoria eyed each other unhappily.

"To *whom?*" Aunt Victoria asked.

Miss Appleton negotiated in-

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troductions and herded them into an elevator that linked the landing field surmounting Grand Central to the subways below. There was little traffic on the surface of the island. The available space was needed for crops. Every known variety of fruit and vegetable was raised here in hydroponic vats built right on top of the rubble left by the *fin de siecle* blasts, and hardly a month went by without the development of a new, true-breeding mutation superior either in terms of nutrition or taste to the varieties then being grown. No other area in North America had been so heavily bombed during the brief political crisis at the turn of the century, and therefore New York New, despite a rather peripheral position, had become the agricultural center of the continent.

The Empire State Building, since it had somehow escaped destruction in the blasts, remained in the hands of private enterprise, and the observatory floors were still, as they had been a century before, a standard feature of every tourist's tour, more especially since the building was now the oldest artifact on the island. The rest of the island, however, was the exclusive preserve of the Federal Government, which had developed its hydroponics system.

Coming up out of the subway on 34th Street (as the general area around the Empire State was still called, though all streets but Broadway were defunct), the party of five found themselves in the Empire State Park, where the city's prize mutations were displayed in natural settings. Giant sweet-peas twined up about hundred-foot oaks that had reached their present height in four seasons of forced growth. Lawns of thick, sturdy moss covered the grounds, and in the distance along the East River could be seen the lilypads where the higher government officials had their homes. The entertainment area was spread across the Hudson.

Charlie and Linda hardly noticed the parkland; their attention was fixed upon the building itself, seeking the source of the almost overpowering greeting that emanated from the gray monolith—as though Everest were to try and say hello.

Miss Appleton noticed the children's perplexity. "That's where you'll be staying while you're here, of course. The other children are up in the Observatory now. You can barely see their head over the edge—there!"

They looked up, and they saw themselves below through a hundred pair of eyes, and they saw the sweeping parabolas of the building's profile directing the eye to the infinite perspectives of space.

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Charlie reached for Linda's hand, and their joined minds replied to Everest's immense *hello.*

THEIR rooms were on the second floor. Aunt Victoria professed to be scandalized at the fact that the room she and Linda were to share communicated through the bath to the room that had been assigned to Grist and Charlie. Miss Appleton said she would do something and disappeared.

That night the adults were going to visit the lilypads on the Hudson and see a musical comedy, while the children were to have a quiet little party on the 86th floor. Even now, in their own rooms, Charlie and Linda could feel the whispers and cobwebs of the others' thoughts. Was it possible that the sheer vastness of so many minds would blot out even the extravagance of their own swift-flowering love? Charlie worried, but Linda was untroubled. This would be like the coming-out she had always dreamed of.

While they waited for evening and went through the motions of unpacking and cleaning up, Charlie and Linda, through the thin wall between them (the partition was not an original element of the building), ventured deeper into the enchanted forests of each other's minds.

Charlie wanted to know more about Aunt Victoria. He shared some of Grist's instinctive dislike for the old woman, and he could not understand (though he was a partner to her feelings) Linda's tolerant affection. Everything that Linda offered in defense of her aunt—her moral fervor; her god-fearing rectitude; even her pacifism—strengthened Charlie in his original distaste. She reminded him of the matron, Miss Bunckle: censorious, mean-minded.

She's a throwback to the 20th Century!

So—what's wrong with the 20th Century? Do you think things have improved since then?

"What'd you say, boy?" Grist asked.

Charlie still had some things to learn about telepathy. "I said, uh . . ." He fumbled, then opted for the truth. "That old biddy next door is a throwback to the 20th Century."

Grist laughed. "Yeah, if you ask me she's a ————!"

Linda found barriers in Charlie's mind, too. These were mainly shadows Grist had cast. Charlie resented Grist, but Linda could sense the admiration that underlay his resentment, and underlaying even that an abiding hatred that was incomprehensible to her. Coming across the traces of these feelings in Charlie's mind was like finding a large rock in a mouthful of chocolate

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pudding: she could not assimilate it.

Yet it was precisely these kernels of mystery in the other person that caught them up even tighter in the meshes of love. When it had come time to go to the party, neither felt the slightest doubt that their love might be dilluted by the larger bond. The mystery between them was illimitable and as yet scarcely touched.

THERE were so many names to remember, and telepathy did not help at that at all. There was Bobby Ryan and Walter Wagenknecht. Bruce Burton was the one wearing shorts. Dora and Cassy Bensen were twins. The 102 children looked as much unlike each other as any 102 supernormal children might. Yet the traits they had in common quite overshadowed any dissimilarities: they were telepaths; they were, give or take some three months, all of an age; they were orphans—and, surely the most remarkable "coincidence," orphans who had lost their mothers at birth and had never known their fathers.

It was therefore quite understandable that the children's party-spirits were dampened by the necessity of finding out as quickly as they might just who they were and what they were doing all together in the Empire State Building. The 102 candles on the big cake that was the centerpiece on the buffet had burned down right into the frosting without being noticed.

The children thought. It was hard, inexperienced as they were, for all of them to think clearly together. Walter Wagenknecht's mind was one of the strongest among them, and the group let his consciousness ride on the wave-crest of their thought, directing it.

Charlie immediately resented this arrangement, but he admitted (to Walter himself, who had instantly sensed Charlie's nascent mutiny) that someone had to do what Walter was doing, or their several minds would knock about like the particles of a Brownian movement. Reluctantly, Charlie allowed his mind to be swallowed into the greater mind of the group.

Every child at some time suspects that he is an orphan, and every orphan is certain that his father is noble, rich, or (in extreme cases) divine. These orphans were no exception. And in their case there was good reason to suppose that the Cowbird Theory was true.

The problem, then, was—to what degree was that theory true? Were they, strictly speaking, human?

Walter thought not.

They *looked* human, but they

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were all mature enough not to be persuaded by this. Their telepathy was a much stronger argument *against* their humanity, but not enough to turn the balance.

There was the suggestive fact that somehow the idea of the Empire State Building flying off into space had been planted in each of their minds. There was the *hope* that that *might* happen, but it was so strong a hope and there was so little real evidence to support it, that no one dared to hope too deeply.

The greatest argument against their humanity was their own profound distaste for the great bulk of human folly, but since they shared their mysanthropy, such as it was, with the greatest figures in human history, it was not a conclusive argument.

One thing was certain: whether, biologically, they were human or not, mentally they were not. From this certainty, Walter had drawn a further conclusion: *We can do what we want to do. The problem is going to be what we want to do—with the others.*

The image of 102 H-Bombs rose unbidden into Charlie's mind, and with such strength that the others received it clearly. There was a feeling of embarrassment among those who took his meaning quickly, and the feeling spread like ripples in a pond as their understanding spread to the more naive.

Charlie was clearly blushing.

Wagenknecht spoke aloud: "We will have to consider that, too. Killing them may be our only alternative. They will probably want to kill us."

Wagenknecht?

The young Negro opened his mind to Charlie's urgent question. The other hundred orphans were excluded.

It was surprising how alike they were. Both had spent their entire lives in orphanages; both were in the military now. The corresponding figure in Waller's background for Grist was a Captain Ferber.

But the closest link between them was the thought that had formed at the very instant that their two minds had fused: that, together, they—and the rest of the children—could dominate the entire world.

Or even destroy it.

Charlie?

Charlie took Linda's hand in his again. But already he had formed with Wagenknecht a tacit agreement to divide the world in two hemispheres—if it should come to that.

GRIST was hungover something terrible. And the "little something" that Talent-Hunt had given him for expenses was shot. The worse part of it was that he had been so drunk by the time he reached the place where

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(he supposed) he'd lost it that he didn't remember one detail of the spending.

He, and the 102 winners of the Talent-Hunt, and the 101 other guardians were gathered in a smallish auditorium on the 15th floor of the building, once a restaurant, where they were being harangued by the intolerable Mr. Maximast.

". . . and so, in this time of world-crises, the most precious natural resource of our dear country is you, her children. You are her future. In twenty years *you* will invent her weapons, mastermind her global strategy, command her troops, and instruct the *next* generation, who shall in their turn pass on the torch of freedom that we have handed on to you."

It had gone on like that for the better part of an hour, and what it all boiled down to was that the kids had won scholarships to some fancy school in Europe, or somewhere, that Grist had never heard of. A school for bright kids. Well, he'd like to see them get Charlie C-Company out of the Army.

And what about the rest of these kids? It looked like half the boys *at least* were from Army orphanages. Grist smelled a rat.

What if, Grist pondered, *this Talent-Hunt business were just a front?* And who was more likely to be behind it than the C.I.A.? They wanted to horn in on the Army's monopoly. They were trying to amend the Mannheim Act. There was no telling what they might try.

They were doing something weird, all right. Grist had been drilling children, boys at least, for years—and he had never seen a bunch of them behaving like this. They just sat around like a bunch of zombies, listening to that dumb speaker.

Grist, his patience worn thin, rose from his seat and made his way to the back of the auditorium, where Miss Appleton brooded benignly over her swarm of little geniuses.

"Is there a payphone nearby?" he asked.

Miss Appleton gave him directions to find the phone. When he left, Mr. Maximast was still speaking.

* * *

The children stirred uneasily in their seats.

Mr. Maximast had just explained that he was their father. Charlie's mind reached out to Linda's comfortingly. *Sister, sister.* Cold comfort, that.

While the apparent Mr. Maximast rattled on about freedom's torch in a dismayingly mechanical manner (the adults in the auditorium were stifling with boredom), the *essential* Mr. Maxi-

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mast explained, telepathically, that he was their father in the mechanical rather than the biological sense, a distinction that was clear enough when one understood that Mr. Maximast himself was mechanical rather than biological. Miss Appleton too, for all her graces, was an automaton.

Further, the children were informed, their mothers—that is, the women who had died bringing the orphans to birth—were not, in the biological sense their mothers.

And further: that each orphan would shortly have the opportunity of meeting his or her true parents. But the nature of these parents, Mr. Maximast did not make clear. This had not been put onto the tape which he was broadcasting.

That telepathy could be mechanically reproduced explained at least one of the mysteries that had been bothering the children: the 102 identical essays. Maximast admitted that, on a night shortly after the Talent-Hunt had been announced on television and in the nation's leading comic books, the entire text of the essay had been transmitted *everywhere* —and with such force that no one who received it was able to resist submitting it to the Talent Hunt.

Mr. Maximast concluded both his spoken and his unspoken speeches with an invitation to see the view from the 102nd floor—the top floor of the Empire State Building.

When he left the platform, there was some listless applause and then a total silence. A few of the adults got up. Aunt Victoria nudged her niece, who was sitting there with the silliest grin on her face. She couldn't really blame the girl for not paying attention. She had never heard a more boring speaker.

Miss Appleton bustled down the aisle. "There's to be a special tour to the New Botanical Gardens. Just for adults."

Aunt Victoria so much wanted to see the famous gardens, and the children *had* been so well behaved.

"*Do* you mind if I go off, Linda darling?"

"Not at all, Auntie. I'm sure the Gardens are very exciting. I'll be all right. Charlie will look after me."

Aunt Victoria did not really approve of the boy. He seemed so coarse. Yet, surely, that was not his fault, but of the people in the Army, like Grist, who had coarsened him. Last night, she had heard Grist coming in at 4:00. Stumbling all over everything; almost certainly drunk. There was no telling where he had *been*. What kind of example was that to set a ten-year-old boy? Actually, it was Linda's *duty*, as a

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Christian, to help counteract the older man's bad influence. Aunt Victoria smiled and dug into her purse. She found two caramels wrapped in cellophane.

"*One* is for Charles, Linda."

"Oh yes, Auntie." She ran off to join the rest of the children. The dear little thing!

IN the last forty-eight hours, General Virgil Tricker of Army Security had received two phone calls from New York New reporting the attempted abduction of Army orphans by the C.I.A.—the first from a Captain Ferber, the latest from a Sargeant Grist.

A preposterous notion, of course, but he had nonetheless assigned some investigators to look into the organization of the Talent-Hunt, and though the C.I.A. appeared to have no fingers in this pie, it looked odder and odder.

The object of his investigation was called Talent-Hunt. Talent-Hunt seemed to have no other purpose than discovering talented orphans, no discernible origins, and no staff. It was a project of the Mortemain Foundation, a non-profit organization which had first evidenced itself as a legal entity on June 12, 1996, the day that it purchased the Empire State Building. After that purchase the only acts of the Foundation for which Tricker could find any record were some dozen politely obstinate refusals to lease office space in the Empire State to the Federal Government Tourist Board. All available office space—that which was not occupied by the Foundation itself—was being leased to businesses and individuals owned or in the employ of the Mortemain Foundation, and who seemed to have no other purpose (and very little more existence) than that which they served by occupying space—on paper.

All this seemed suspicious to General Tricker, and now the further circumstance of the Mortemain Foundation gathering to itself a group of exceptionally talented orphans confirmed him in his intentions to stick his nose in. What else is Army Security for?

He shuffled through the dossiers on the various Army officers presently assembled in New York New as guardians for orphans, but it was in Grist, his second informant, that he sensed that elusive nastiness which is the fundamental quality of a spy, however it be then overlaid with the cosmetic of forms and custom.

Tricker gave his secretary directions to inform Grist of his new responsibilities and then, as an afterthought, called the Attorney-General. He gave him the name of the Mortemain Foundation for his list. Hardly an im-

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portant detail, but General Tricker's respect for due process died hard.

It was four o'clock, and he felt, as after a particularly satisfying meal, a sense of real *achievement*. He had an hour before he was expected home for dinner. It was time enough, he thought, to catch a breath of fresh air. It had been weeks since he'd gone up to the surface.

Twenty minutes later, he went through the last airlock into the Pentagon Gardens. It was raining, and he rejoiced: It had been three years since he had seen the rain. He went into an arbor where no one could see him and removed his hat.

Sometimes life could be beautiful.

TO get to the 102nd floor, you took an express elevator from Main to 80. That was when your ears popped. Then, there was a bank of four elevators that ferried back and forth from 80 to 86, where they took your ticket. Except that today again the children had the Observatory to themselves. From 86 to 102 there was only one elevator—and it was manually operated! The children were quick to suspect that the hand at the controls was a robot's.

Only twenty children at a time could go up to 102. The rest went out on the Observatory terrace.

I was on 102 the very first day I came here, Bruce Burton made known to the group. *I didn't see anything so special about it.* Nor could the rest of them, focusing on Bruce's eidetic image of the 102nd floor observatory, see anything special.

Visibility was good today, and there was a stiff wind blowing. The view from a great height is a tonic for the spirit, which can encompass and contain all that it sees. Down below, with the trees towering overhead or hemmed in by the great vats, the immensity of the city mocked at human nature.

Distance seduces the rational mind, just as closeness seduces the irrational. Was not Christ led to a mountain height to be tempted? It seemed to Walter and Charlie that nothing prevented them from conquering the great, green forest of New York New by force, just as they had conquered it now by perspective.

Linda was uneasy. Everyone had gone up but a little group of ten children. The elevator operator called for them. She thought: *Our parents—I hope they look like us.* Though they knew she was being foolish, they all echoed the thought.

The door of the elevator closed, and then it opened onto a small concrete chamber, twenty feet by twenty feet, with a ceiling so low that anyone taller than the chil-

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dren would have had to stoop. There were no windows. The other children who had gone up before them weren't there.

"This isn't 102," Bruce Burton whispered.

"Actually," said the elevator operator, "it *is*. The top observatory floor of the building is not, in fact, the top floor. It never was, though naturally for the sake of the tourists' happiness it was always called the 102nd floor. In the 20th Century the top floor—this floor—was rented out to radio and television stations. They transmitted from here. After the blasts there were nothing to transmit and no one to transmit it—in New York, at least—so we took over the top floor for ourselves. Nobody knows it exists."

The few banks of technical equipment in the middle of the room were really quite unimpressive.

A spaceship?

Impossible, Walter decided. *But it could be a matter transmitter. That would be more sensible for getting places in a hurry.*

As though to confirm Walter in his judgment, Mr. Maximast suddenly manifested himself in the center of the complex of equipment. Materialized was, perhaps, a better word. He beckoned to the children.

One at a time they went to him. He positioned them in front of the apparatus, and one at a time they disappeared.

Walter and Linda and Charlie were the only ones left.

Then Walter and Charlie were the only ones left. Charlie sensed Walter's growing panic. Walter was thinking of a poem Charlie had never heard called "Ten Little Indians."

Then, Walter was left by himself. Maximast beckoned to him, but he was afraid, as a soul must be afraid called before the seat of judgment. And only minutes ago he had thought of conquering the world!

Maximast waved to the boy impatiently. Walter bolted for the elevator, but the attendant caught him and carried him, kicking and screaming, to Maximast. Walter was no match for two robots.

CHARLIE'S ears popped for a second time.

He found himself in the middle of an almost identical room *filled* with children; certainly more than 102 children. The telepathic turmoil in the confined space was so great that Charlie could scarcely hear himself think.

Two strange children came toward him. A boy and a girl. The boy's hand was extended in greeting. The girl was crying.

"Hi!" said Charlie, uncertain of what was expected of him. "I'm Charlie."

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Of course, the boy thought, shaking his hand. *We know all about you. I'm Gregors, and this is Bernice. We are your parents.*

But how— Embarrassed, Charlie stumbled into speech. "I mean, you don't look much older than me."

Bernice replied in English that was accented rather strangely: "But we *are* much older. Your father is 24, and I'll be 21 in a few days."

"But I'm ten years old myself! How could—"

His mother laughed pleasantly. "We mature early, you know."

Charlie related embarrassment.

Behind him there was a scream. Walter Wagenknecht had just arrived. Two more children (if they could be called children), a white girl and a Negro boy, approached their son.

An ugly thought entered Charlie's mind: *Midgets! You're midgets, and I am too.* It was awful.

Gregors interposed a kindly thought: In a land of midgets, a tall man would be a freak. Charlie felt he would like Gregors. But his *father?* That would take getting used to.

Gregors, he thought. *Bernice.* He liked the sounds of their names. But—

"What's my last name?" he asked.

"Forrestal," Gregors said.

"Charles Forrestal," said Charlie Forrestal, rolling his r's luxouriously.

Bernice took his hand: her own was no bigger than his. "Come—see our city. The observatory is only down one flight of steps. You have many more surprises in store for you today. Then tonight there'll be a dinner for all of you, and tomorrow—if they'll let you come away with us—we'll go to our country place in the Poconos. The summer *is* so—" She sought for the word she wanted in Charlie's mind. "—*beastly* in New York."

New York?

Ah, his mother thought, *you call it New York New. I forgot.*

The three of them went down the narrow stairs to the Observatory in single file. It was just as Charlie had seen it in Bruce Burton's mind.

But the view outside was totally different. Nothing like New York New. It was an enormous varicolored honeycomb, arranged in the most eccentric shapes—and (Charlie observed this with a moment's panic) still arranging itself! For here and there on the periphery of one of the huge volumes, a component or group of components would detach itself from the parent mass, drift up into the middle air, and then settle upon some other spot. Vaguely, Charlie sensed that there was a pattern in these

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changes, but too vast for him to grasp at once.

A random thought of his mother entered Charlie's mind: *I hate rush hour.* She sensed his bewilderment.

Those are homes, she explained. *People are done with work, and they're taking their homes back to their apartments.*

New York—this? Yet, looking closer, he could see the general contours of the island between the two rivers. And, there, beyond the East River, Brooklyn; and there, beyond the Hudson, New Jersey.

Charlie felt a familiar presence in the room. Linda. She came running to him, and he caught her up in his arms and they kissed. It was though they had been apart for years!

Isn't it wonderful!

Her thoughts came to him so fast, it was hard to sort them out. She felt around the edge of his puzzlement.

Charlie, darling, don't you know what year *this is?*

It was the year 3652 A.D.

GREGORS Forrestal was a dabbler in non-terrene gardening. As his wife once put it, he had a red thumb.

For Charlie, the visit to the country place was just as good as a trip to Altair. Gregors conducted him among the blossoming lungplants until he sensed that the boy had had enough. In certain people, the color of the Altarean plants produced an almost allergenic reaction, which was compounded by having the longer wave-lengths of the visible spectrum filtered-out by the force-shell spread over the Forrestal estate.

The family—Gregors, Bernice, and Charlie—retired to a patch of mildly euphoric Altairean lovemoss and spread out the picnic cloth. After lunch, Bernice began to think of some of her favorite songs, but they sounded like static to Charlie's untrained ear.

Despite the benign influence of the lovemoss, Charlie began to grow peeved. Everything he had seen in New York and here in the Poconos had led him to the conviction that he had lost his birthright for a mess of pottage without ever being asked. Instead of living in a future of peace, plenty, and universal brotherhood, he had been born in the anxiety-riden 21st Century, raised an orphan, and denied the companionship of his own kind.

But that's over for now, Bernice suggested soothingly.

If only it were, Charlie thought bitterly. *But I have to go back there. To that terrible time. To that stupid building.*

The image of the great building rose into his parents' consciousness, where it called forth

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feeling of subdued reverence. In the 37th Century, as in the 21st, the Empire State Building was the oldest artifact on the island of Manhattan—and, with the exception of the foundation stones of Chartres and the pyramids, anywhere in the world. But Chartres and the pyramids had gotten through the centuries on their own merits—without the assistance of benevolent time travellers to do maintenance work.

Time travel was perfected in the year 3649, after four centuries of trial and error and error and error. During this period, important advances were made in the mathematical analysis of history. It was discovered that the perfect continuity of human history had only been disrupted once—in the period from 1996 to 2065 A.D. By the time the first machine was ready to be installed in the top floor of the Empire State Building (by its continuous survival through the centuries, that was the obvious cite for their purposes), the historico-mathematical models were complete enough to implement a completely effective program.

The only thing lacking was personnel to carry out the program.

In the period from 1996 to 3649, the human race had evolved (largely, by artificial means) to such a point that it would not be possible for adults of that future world to return to the past even to handle such simple transactions as the purchase of the Empire State Building. The adults of 3649 would look like children to the adults of that earlier day; worse, the psy-sensitives of the future could not have endured the noxious mental environment of the 21st Century for more than a few minutes. Therefore, Jr. Maximast and a corps of assistants were designed to carry out the first steps of the Transaction.

Maximast's first task was the purchase of the building. Then he equipped it with the force-shields that preserved it during the atomic blast of the following year. From 1997 to 2050, he had only to maintain the building and the Mortemain Foundation and wait for the historical condition to ripen.

It was the next step of the Transaction that Charlie balked at; it was this step that so dearly concerned his own destiny—the initiation of the Talent-Hunt. For the talent had first to be sown before it could be reaped.

Maximast undertook both chores.

Fertilized ova, imported from the year 3650, were planted in several overgenerous and unfortunate ladies, where they developed at such an accelerated pace that the body of the "host" ("mother" was hardly the right

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word) invariably expired at the time of parturition.

This manner of birth had been cruel, but there had been no alternative. The child of a telepathic mother could not have survived the shock of being separated from his mother at birth—for it is exactly at that time that the telepathic bond between mother and child is greatest. It was likewise impossible for them to grow up in the 37th Century, for then their utility in the past would be destroyed. It was essential that those who carried out the Transaction be regarded as a natural product of their own times.

And therefore—

But I don't want to go back! Charlie was almost whining now.

And you don't have to. For a year, at least.

Charlie wouldn't be reasoned with. *I don't want to—ever!*

His father's mind intruded upon them: *Be a man, Charles. You're ten years old, and it's your duty to go back.* Then, with a trace of mellow humor: *How else will you be able to conquer the world?*

The combination of his father's good humor and his mother's coaxing and the euphoria produced by the lovemoss was too much for Charlie. His mind softened. Gently his parents began to flood it with their own years of wisdom and experience.

HELLO there, 743. What you been up to?"

"I was with the other—at the Observatory." Though he had gone through this little speech several times, it was still unsettling to adjust to the temporal shift. Since he had last seen Grist, Charlie had aged a full year, Grist only hours.

The hotel room was dark. Charlie could barely make out the Drillmaster's silhouette on the bed. Now that his own sensibilities were more developed, Charlie found it painful to come into an atmosphere this dense with animosity. He realized now why neither his parents nor any other adult who had matured in the future could have returned to the past: they could no more have endured the pressures against their consciousness than a brook trout could have endured the pressures at the bottom of the Mindinao Deeps.

Grist snapped on the light. He was in uniform.

"We should have us a man-to-man talk, boy."

"Yes sir."

Charlie's mind reached out to the next room, but Linda had not yet returned. Nor, he realized unhappily, would she be likely to return for several hours. Immediately upon their return from 102, Charlie and Linda had been met by Aunt Victoria, who carried Linda off to a vegetarian

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restaurant and a lecture on nonviolence.

"How about you and me playing some more poker?"

"Yes sir."

"That's the spirit. Maybe you can win back some of that $430 you owe me." Grist's smile flickered *on* like a fluorescent light fixture.

A table was already set up in the center of the room. On it, as though arranged for inspection were: a bottle of bourbon, a bucket of ice, two glasses, and an unopened deck of cards.

"You break the deck," Grist bade.

Charlie broke, shuffled, and dealt two hands. They both stood pat, and Charlie won—with a pair of queens.

"I'm going to fix me a drink," Grist said. "Maybe you'd like some ice water?"

Charlie said nothing, and Grist left the room with two empty glasses. When he returned there was water in one of them.

Grist held up the bottle of bourbon. "Maybe you'd like just a bit of this for flavoring?" The smile glowed brighter.

Charlie, entranced by the man's sheer nastiness, nodded. "You deal," he said.

Charlie won again—this time by bluffing. Grist splashed some more bourbon in both glasses.

"Tell me about what you've been doing," Grist said, leaning back with his drink. "What do you think of the other kids. They're sort of strange, don't you think? And who's this Maximast character? Is Maximast a foreign name?"

"They're just kids," Charlie said, sipping at his drink. Though he had grown used, in the last year, to wine in the Forrestal household, he had to remember that bourbon had a much higher proof.

"You deal," Grist said.

Already, the Drillmaster noticed, the boy's movements had grown sluggish. You had to hand it to Army Security: they worked quick. They'd got the bootlegged scopalamine to him within an hour of his asking.

"Tell me, Charlie-boy," Grist began again. "Tell me some more."

He was going to enjoy this.

HIS mind was inert: cinders and ashes. Linda poked about in them for a live coal. Meanwhile she had to hide her tears from Aunt Victoria who was combing out her long gray hair at the dresser mirror, calmly discussing the message of Dr. Wurstle, the evening's lecturer.

Charlie rolled over on the bed. Linda's poking about had awakened a nightmare. She probed more urgently: *Charlie—what happened—answer me!"*

The deepest reaches of his

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mind answered her before he was fully conscious. He did not resist her questioning. He did not lie. The scopalamine was still operative.

He heard her fumbling at the door of the bathroom. Then she was beside him. She had turned on the bedside lamp and was wiping the sweat from his forehead with the edge of the sheet.

Grist heard everything? she demanded.

Everything! Everything!

She tried to assuage his guilt, which was greater than her astonishment, greater than her fright, greater even than her pity.

Yet it was no greater than their love.

She kissed him. His arms drew her closer, and their minds merged in a perfect embrace.

"Linda!"

It was Aunt Victoria's voice.

"What *are* you doing?"

Linda turned to face her aunt, who stood in the doorway to the bathroom in a cotton nightgown, her hair braided for sleep.

"I heard Charles being sick, Auntie, and I came to help."

"Is that true, Charles?"

Helplessly, Charles spoke the truth: "No, ma'am."

"What *were* you doing, Charles?"

"I was kissing Linda."

At least, Aunt Victoria thought, *you had to give the boy credit for telling the truth.*

"I'll deal with you later, *young* lady. So, run along in to your room. You have no business *here.*"

"Neither does the *old* lady," replied Grist's voice, fuzzily.

He was standing in the doorway to the hall, holding to the post for support. During his interrogation of Charlie, he had polished off the entire fifth of bourbon. Behind him were two Army Security guards.

"Let's get a move on out of here, Charlie-boy," Grist commanded, with as much of his Drillmaster manner as he could muster in his present condition. "You've got a long and complicated story to tell some important people."

Charlie got out of bed, but Aunt Victoria caught hold of his arm.

"This boy is not leaving this room until *I* have had a satisfactory explanation for the behavior I witnessed this evening."

Grist cocked his head, puzzled.

"I found him in this room—on that bed—*kissing* my niece!"

"Well, be happy it wasn't worse than that." Grist caught hold of Charlie's other arm and tried to pull him away from the old woman. She held tight.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean they're married. Man and wife. He told me so himself."

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Charlie felt Victoria's fingers dig into his biceps with painful force.

"Are you mad?" she asked in really quite a calm voice.

"Not at all. You wouldn't think so to look at them, but those two kids are as grown-up as you or me. And they're telepathic! Can you imagine the weapon *that* could be in the right hands? Now, let go of him! I'm bringing him in to Army Security Headquarters at the Pentagon. And this whole building is under Army surveillance. By tomorrow morning, your own niece will be in the brig right beside lover-boy here."

"Auntie. . . . Auntie . . ." Linda was pulling at Victoria's nightgown petulantly.

"Not now, darling." She was wondering how she might protect the boy for at least the rest of the night. She had always thought there was something strange about that man Grist.

"Auntie, that's the man who taught us how to kiss." Linda pointed at Grist.

The Sergeant laughed. "Come off it," he said. But his ears were growing red, and the two guards did step back a pace.

"He told us all grown-ups kiss —and he said we were grown-ups too. Was he lying, Auntie?"

When it suited her purpose, Linda could appear to be much *less* than ten years old. Charlie had a hard time keeping a straight face.

Aunt Victoria knelt down beside Charles. She took his face in her strong right hand and turned it so that their eyes met. Her eyes were like Linda's. For the first time, Charlie liked Aunt Victoria.

"Charles, I know you'll tell me the truth. You did before. Is what Linda said just now the truth? Did this—this *gentleman* teach you about . . . such things?"

Helpless to speak anything but truth, Charlie's mouth opened to speak, but Linda's will stopped the words from coming out. When he spoke, it was not of his own volition: Linda spoke through him.

"Yes, Auntie," she said.

Victoria was touched to hear the boy call her Auntie. She *had* reached him, after all. If he had gone wrong, it was not *his* fault.

She stood up.

"Gentlemen," she said, addressing the two Security guards that Grist had brought in with him, "I charge you to arrest this man on the charge of corrupting the morals of minors. You have heard him accused not only by these children, but out of his own mouth."

Grist turned to the guards angrily. "You'll arrest who you came here to arrest," he bellowed drunkenly. Then, pointing

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at Charlie: "Arrest that child!"

At exactly that moment, Charles Forrestal sat down on the floor of the hotel room and began to cry.

"Gentlemen," said Aunt Victoria in her coldest voice, "if you do not arrest that drunken beast *immediately* and remove him from this room, I shall personally see to it that every Army orphanage in this country is closed by the end of the month. And I shall charge both of you with attempting to assist this man in his criminal purposes."

The guards with no more hesitation handcuffed Grist and marched him out of the room.

Again Aunt Victoria knelt down beside Charlie and lifted his head. "There, there," she soothed. "It was all just a bad dream. But it's all over now. You're going to come home with us and go to a *proper* school. You can be a brother to Linda."

EVERYONE—even the generals—hated the non-war. It cost much and returned no profit: it was insane. Yet almost all adults were too deeply tangled in the system that produced the non-war to see their way out. That was almost the definition of being an adult: that you couldn't see the way out.

Children could see the way out quite clearly: everyone simply stopped fighting and stopped making weapons. The people who used to make weapons could then do something better.

That, however, was pacifism, and few adults—with the exception of odd ducks like Aunt Victoria—had the time or the patience or the freedom of personal action to be pacifists.

For children, it was another matter. Children could not be prosecuted under the law. Children did have time, and they did not have to worry about losing their jobs. All that was required to start a full-scale Children's Crusade, therefore, was competent leadership.

With the right leaders, there didn't seem to be anything that could stop it. With the right leaders, children could conquer the whole world.

"Aunt Victoria?"

"Yes, Charles?"

"If someone is doing something bad, and nobody else says anything about it, and I *see* it, what should I do?"

Aunt Victoria didn't have to think about that at all: "You must do the right thing, and you must stop other people from doing the wrong thing."

"Aunt Victoria, is war wrong?"

"Yes, Charles. War is always wrong."

For the rest of the trip back home, the children were perfect lambs. **THE END**

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LOOK OUT BELOW

By JACK SHARKEY

It's a terrible thing for a man when ambition and desire makes him set his sights—lower!

LORMER winced at the reflection of the morning sunlight from the polished white marble top of the table. He was on the topmost terrace of the alabaster building and above him lay nothing but its soaring spires, almost like crystal in their stark, clean pallor as the first rays of dawn shattered into pincushions of rebounding light upon them. At this level of the building, everything was white; the thick carpets, the silken wall hangings, the furniture, even the woodwork—planed, bleached and sanded—shone as immaculately white as the porcelain jug of fresh cream beside his coffee cup.

It was good to be there. His needs were satisfied, his longings were assuaged, and—though his sojurn was a lonely one—there was something about the spires that made him think of arrows upon a directional sign. Their tapered, needle-sharp peaks were somehow not the terminus of the building's height, but only upthrusting indications of heights yet to come. And Lormer was happy, and did not mind the loneliness. Sometimes, a new tenant would occupy one of the many empty suites at the topmost level, and then there would be companionship for awhile. Then the morning would come when a bustling sound in the hall would awaken Lormer and—looking out into the carpeted corridor—he would see the parade of clothing, suitcases, and trunks being wheeled toward the elevators by the staff, and know that the heights had proven too rarefied for yet another tenant, and that the loneliness would once again descend upon him until the next person arrived—Or the same one. There were some people who, after departing, returned a second, a third, even a hundredth time. Some of them were abruptly gone, without their be-

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longings, and Lormer knew that they had solved at last the secret of rising beyond the spires. But there were few of these. Most, after a series of attempts at life upon this topmost level, moved lower in the building and did not return. And Lormer caught himself, many times, wondering why.

This, then, was the solitary thorn in what should have been a bed of roses: Lormer's curiosity. "What," he found himself asking the empty whiteness of his surroundings, "*is* on the other levels of the building?" And oftentimes he would wander down the corridor to the elevators, and watch the dancing play of colored lights upon the indicator, and think how simple it would be to depress the button, step aboard the arriving car, and descend . . . Oh, not far. Certainly not far, he would tell himself. Perhaps no more than the floor below, where he had seen—by leaning far out, dangerously far out, beyond the lip of the terrace—the whiteness was tempered with a kind of pale gray pinstripe everywhere. The mists below that level were, of course, well-nigh impenetrable, though at times a fleeting skimpiness in their fabric had shown him glimpses of yet other chromatic values. He did not know the sequence for a certainty, so brief were these moments, but it seemed that gray gave way to blue, and blue to hot scarlet, and beyond that level, all whiteness seemed to have been absorbed by the warmer tones, no longer even ameliorating the hue as a pale pinstripe itself.

THINKING on all this, Lormer swallowed the dregs of his coffee with uncharacteristic impatience, and decided to go to the corridor and watch the light-play upon the indicator. It was very early in the day and no one would be about, but he delayed long enough to remove his pajamas and robe, shower, and dress in his best linen suit, white nylon shirt, and necktie of silk that glistened like new snow, before leaving the suite. "Almost," he chuckled to himself in the corridor, "as though I intended actually leaving this level." He neared the elevators, and then his footsteps came to a halt upon the carpet.

One of the cars was at his level, the doors open invitingly.

Lormer stood and stared at it for a long time. It did not leave. The doors remained wide apart, the emptiness within the car pulling at him like a powerful vacuum. Who could have sent for it? he asked himself, finally moving nearer. The corridor was empty, and once again he reminded himself that he was probably the sole person awake upon the

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topmost level. Then he recalled the great freedom of choice that was his, always, on this level, and how his slightest whims had ever been fulfilled. Not certain that he had actually *wished* for an elevator, he found the notion intriguing, nonetheless. And then he was inside the car and gently depressing the white button with the pale gray pinstripe.

When the doors slid back once more, Lormer very nearly did not get out of the car. It had occurred to him during his swift descent that he knew no one at this new level, and the thought of simply investigating an empty corridor was not very exciting. But directly across from the elevator was the door of a suite, and he saw that it was slightly ajar. Tempted, he stepped out into the corridor, and behind him the elevator doors slid smoothly shut. He approached the suite, and looked at the name upon the bell.

It was his own.

Oddly unsurprised by this, he pressed the door back, and found himself staring into a suite so much like his own, above, that the difference of the pale gray pinstripe was negligible. When he went into the bedroom, he found his clothing in the drawer and closets, at least it was much like his own, save for the new pinstripe upon the fabric. When he looked down at himself, he found that his suit, white a short time before, was now similarly affected. "Then it must be all right," he assured himself, and with a feeling of belonging, he went out onto the terrace and found that even the remains of his breakfast had been brought down intact. He poured another cup of coffee for himself, and when he tasted it, the flavor was a bit more bitter than he preferred, but he told himself it was simply a matter of getting used to it, and settled back with a contented sigh.

HE had company that night. A young couple across the hall (the elevators were farther from his room than he remembered them being, on the topmost level, or when he had gotten off at this), whose names he never quite caught, came over and the three of them played cards until an hour past Lormer's wonted bedtime. "Too bad the play was not for money," said the man, when they were departing. "I'd have made a fortune." The woman's face grew pinched and drawn for a moment, and she took a tighter hold upon her husband's arm with so casual an effort that it did not actually look like a signal, and Lormer would have thought nothing of it, save that when the man had spoken, he thought he heard the distant swish of elevator doors opening far down the corridor, yet when

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the woman had gripped the man's arms, there was the smooth click of their closing once more.

"Odd," he thought, then yawned widely and went to bed.

His sleep was troubled that night.

A lulling, compelling melody drifted through his dreams, and in his dreams he seemed to be upon the terrace, looking downward at flickering shadows upon the body of the mist, shadows which stirred his blood and made him want to go down just one level further to descry the creatures which caused them. But on awakening, he told himself such an idea was a nonsensical one. He was comfortable where he was—though the mattress was a bit less resilient than he'd been accustomed to—and saw no reason for going lower.

The coffee at breakfast was no more bitter than it had been the day before, but Lormer decided suddenly that he was a fool to try and acclimate himself to it, and before he knew it he was out in the corridor thumbing the signal-button for the elevator. It was a longish time in arriving, but when its doors finally gaped before him, he entered without hesitancy and depressed the button of the topmost level.

His trip upward was sluggishly slow, and when he had returned to his erstwhile suite, he was annoyed that his garments were not where they belonged, but simply laid out upon the bed for him to put away unaided. He was of a mind to go right back down to the gray pinstripe level again, but then the thought of that uneasy dreaming buttressed his will, and he began to hunt up coathangers.

That night, he had the dreams again. More faintly, it is true, did he hear that compelling melody, and the shadows far below on the mist were nearly inscrutable. But he awakened to a mood of discontent that was not helped even by his rich-tasting breakfast coffee. His mood persisted till mid-afternoon, at which time he went out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him, and the waiting elevator took him two levels down.

As the doors slid back, his nostrils were filled with a musky perfume, and as he stepped across the corridor to the door of the suite bearing his name, the door was opened by a smiling woman whose affable manner somehow stopped just short of a crystalline hardness in her eyes.

HE was in the elevator a full hour, his next trip upward to the topmost level, and emerged much annoyed. He had tried simply ascending to the gray pinstripe suit, but when he tried that button, nothing happened. "Apparently," he told himself,

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annoyed, "one can descend from each level to the next, but only ascend the full height of the shaft." Why this bothered him he was uncertain, but he was brought out of his meditation by his sudden awareness that his clothing, and his top-level suite, while white as before, seemed a bit faded, as though the suits and shirts had had to be dry-cleaned and bleached many times, and the draperies had been cleansed of lustre along with the dust of disuse. After he had remained there a week, however, he found that all the things had been restored to a state of newness.

But his dreaming did not improve.

On his next descent, he went two levels only to pick up the woman with whom he had been before, and together they went down one more flight. This level was exciting to Lormer. It was lighted by bulbs of warm crimson, and there was unending music, and deft waiters, and much imbibing of champagne. It would have been most enjoyable except that the ratio of men to women there was imbalanced, and a man at a table of men kept looking through the blue haze of tobacco smoke at Lormer's woman, and smiling in a way that churned something deep in Lormer's body to a white-hot froth.

How it began, Lormer could never recall, so fuddled had his mind become with champagne and the ceaseless brassy invasion of the ubiquitous music, the chairs had scraped back, some woman had screamed, and the crimson lighting had clotted against Lormer's vision like seething blood come to rest, and when the lighting came up brighter, the man who had smiled lay unmoving upon the floor, his hair wet with the liquid from the shattered bottle whose neck Lormer found clutched in his hand.

Forms moved toward him, and he called for his woman, but did not wait to see if she followed as he rushed for the elevator. He thumbed the white button with a vicious jab, but the doors remained wide apart, and finally in desperation he struck the button for the next level down, and soon found himself in a new corridor, the sounds of pursuit dim memories somewhere above him.

He found his name upon the door to a room, this time. The level seemed to possess no suites whatsoever. In the room was a table, such as he had just departed, stacked with food and wine. He dropped into a chair and began helping himself gratefully.

When it was time to sleep, he found that there was no bed upon the level at all, but a short staircase led down yet one more level,

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and there he found a room with a ragged canvas cot, upon which he fell into bloated, over-sated slumber. The next morning, investigating this level, he saw that in every room save his the accommodations were deluxe, and he began to hate those who slept there on satin pillows while he writhed upon the rough canvas of the cot.

But on ascending via the staircase to the room with the table, he found a gargantuan breakfast laid out, and the woman was waiting to share it with him. When they went down to his room, later, the cot was much wider than he recalled it being.

CURIOSITY alone brought him to the level below that on which he slept, many days after his arrival there. To get to it, a tortuous and slippery stairway had to be followed, toiling downward until the thought of reclimbing it made his muscles ache. At its bottom lay a bridge, a frail wooden thing over a giddy drop into blackness, and when he had crossed the bridge, he found himself with barely a toehold on a narrow ledge. The wall of the ledge was of rock, but there was a cavern there, its entrance sealed with a thick partition of cold green wax. He clawed and scrabbled upon it, for he had seen the treasure box that shimmered invitingly just beyond, but his fingernails tore light curlicues only from the smooth surface, and he knew that there was only one other way through.

Finding matches in his pocket, he laid them carefully on the narrow ledge, then removed his clothing—noting with a mild surprise that coat, shirt and tie were dull black, with a random design of rusty scarlet—and piled it upon the wooden surface of the bridge.

The fabric lighted swiftly, and the wood followed it, and Lormer clung to the face of the rock until the flare of red heat from the blaze began to turn the green wax partition to molten emerald slag, which began itself to blaze, until bridge and partition slid like burning comets down the empty black air of the abyss, and the cavern lay at last accessible before him. He entered and opened the treasure box.

There was nothing inside.

THE END

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THE HEADSMAN

By IRVIN ASHKENAZY

From the inmost valleys of unknown Appalachia comes a tale of horror . . . a tale that hearkens back to Cromwell, to regicide, to axemen.

NEW WORLD GALLERIES, Ltd.
12 Grand Oaks Avenue
Washington, D.C.
Aubrey Calder, Director

TO: Dr. Calder
FROM: Lucian Gwynn
SUBJECT: Field Report

IF the events of the immediate past are but a grisly hallucination, then I have probably lost my reason. After reading this report I suppose you will be sure of it.

You know how skeptical I was of this assignment. An old newsitem about a fantastic ghost-town in the familiar Great Smokies hardly seemed a basis for spending money on an investigation. When I reached Nashville the secretary of the historical society assured me that there never has been a town in the entire Appalachians named 'Cynoper'. The journal found on the body of that unfortunate uranium prospector had to be a hoax.

I would have given up immediately and returned to Washington had not the word, 'cynoper' gnawed at a thread of memory. Possibly I'd encountered it in some forgotten research years

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ago. At any event, no such word could be found in any reference work available to me there.

The next morning I drove into the Great Smokies, heading for Turkey Run. If the fact or legend of Cynoper still existed, I felt that it would be found, if at all, among the folk who live in that rugged area. As you know, their lonely settlements have yielded many an unsuspected antique.

Over a hundred winding miles I pulled up before Turkey Run's most prominent building, a broad, one-story wooden structure whose porch was piled with sacks of feed. Painted over the front of the building was the legend: GENERAL STORE Post-Office, Bus Depot, James Howlett, prop.

The old codger behind the counter spat when I explained my mission. "Don't know nothin' about no place called Cynoper! Folks here are plumb sick of you piss-ants writin' all them lies about us!" His voice lifted over my protest. "I ain't tellin' y'all nothin'! We're Bible-readin', God-fearin' folks here, but that don't make us a bunch o' hexed-up clapperheads! Go on back to your newspaper!"

"But I'm not—" I began when he drowned me out: "You start crawlin' these hills askin' for the Devil's address, you're liable to be told!"

He came out from behind the counter dragging a broom and began to sweep. "We don't take the Lord's name in vain, nor the Devil's," he muttered darkly, sweeping dust and loose hay over my shoes and trousers.

I stepped out of the way. "What about old Gregory?"

He paused, peering up from under a snowy thatch of eyebrows. Claney's report, you'll recall, mentions belief in a local thanatos by that name.

"Can you talk about *him?*" I asked.

"You want to buy somethin'?"

I asked for a bottle of pop. He opened a bottle of warm cherry soda, set it before me, pocketed my dime, and resumed sweeping. I toyed with the bottle, musing aloud that Claney had written that he'd actually been in Cynoper.

He paused once again, turned and rifled a jet of tobacco juice through the open door of the cold, pot-bellied stove.

"A walled ghost-town in the cup of a small valley not too far from here." I took a five dollar bill, folded it lengthwise, and held it toward him. "Can't you remember?"

He plucked it from my fingers and stuffed it into a pants pocket. "Don't know about no ghosts, but if you're talkin' about a town what done died, there's Roundhead."

"Roundhead?"

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"'Cept it ain't in no valley and there ain't no walls. No people, neither, 'ceptin' the Deacon, him and his daughter."

"The Deacon?"

"That's whut they call him," He resumed his sweeping. "Name's Brandon. Reverend Brandon he calls hisself." He grunted ironically.

"Why does he stay there?"

He glanced at me over the broom. "I wouldn't be knowin'. Useta be quite a place once. I was born there."

"Oh?"

"When they built the highway through here, that was the end of Roundhead. Nobody goes there anymore."

"Funny. My father was an itinerant preacher. He held tent meetings in just about every small town in the South. I don't recall him ever mentioning Roundhead."

The old man had stopped sweeping, pondering me with jaundiced humor. "Preacher's son, hey?" He shook his head. "That's the worst kind."

"How do I get there?"

"Huh? Oh." He sighed. "Well, if you think it's wuth it—you keep goin' down the blacktop 'bout three miles. You'll see a stump with a mailbox on it. The road takes off north from there. The town sets on Roundhead Ridge between two mountains—Naseby and Ironsides."

The names held me bemused.

"I sure wouldn't try takin' a car up that road myse'f," he said gloomily. "That's where this feller, Claney, got hisself kilt. His carcass was packed in across a mule. They laid him out right in front o' my sto'." He jerked his head at the front door. "Man, that's somethin' I never want to see ag'in, the way he was mashed up." The old man grimaced. "His haid chawed off, like with a dull axe."

"I'll be careful. Thank you." I started for the door, pausing as he called after me: "Friend! It ain't just the road. The Deacon—he don't hold with strangers comin' up on him onexpected-like."

I looked around. "What should I do—send up smoke signals?"

He scowled, turned, and scored another bull's eye through the stove door. "Do what you like." He stood the broom against the wall and shuffled back to his stool behind the counter. "Go on! Don't jest stand there. I gave y'all your money's worth!"

"The Reverend," I inquired softly, "wouldn't be running a still on the side, would he?"

"I didn't say that!"

I grinned and sauntered back. "What kind of a preacher is he?"

"I wouldn't know, friend," he muttered, avoiding my eyes.

"Well—you lived in Roundhead. Weren't you part of his congregation?"

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He glanced at me sharply. "Hell, no! When I want to hear the word o' God, I want to hear it from a white man!"

My astonishment must have been too obvious, for he added quickly, "Roundhead was mostly a bunch o' hell-raisin' hog-grubbers. And half-breeds at that! The Deacon, he's part Injun, part nigger, part God-knows-what."

"Oh?" I studied him speculatively.

He looked up suddenly, breaking the momentary silence. "*My* folks was white! All white!"

"It's nice to know," I smiled.

As I left I could feel his tawny eyes on my back like smouldering coals.

THE road was hardly more than a pair of weed-grown ruts that zigzagged through a valley forest for a jolting mile or so, then roller-coastered over a series of hills into a deep ravine. I threaded my car through a tangle of twists and turns until I came out suddenly on a sun-splashed canyon carpeted with a broad, shallow stream. The ruts led me across the sparkling waters to the opposite bank.

They continued along the shore for several miles. Then the canyon wall crowded in to the edge of the river, and the road lifted along a winding terrace cut into the rock. Eventually it levelled out, snaking along its face like a sinuous scar. I clutched the wheel with sweating palms, not daring to take my eyes from the few yards immediately ahead.

I found occasional relief where the road descended for brief detours around and over foaming brooks that fed the river, or through bowered enclaves of flaming laurel whose breathless beauty made me forget my utter loneliness. They gave me moments in which to conjecture and surmise.

What 17th century colony of refugees had settled here? That they had fought against King Charles in England's Civil War I had no doubt. It is apparent in the very names laid upon the land. The King's Cavaliers had derided them as 'Roundheads' because they cut their hair short, but Puritan valor had transformed it into a proud title, even as the Americans, over a hundred years later, made 'Yankee' a badge of honor. Cromwell had called them his 'Ironsides', a title well-earned when they crushed Charles' Cavaliers at the Battle of Naseby . . . But, of course, unlike the American Revolution, it was all for nought.

Some there were, however, who escaped Royalist vengeance. What unrecorded exodus had brought them here?

The sun was high when, at last, I approached Mt. Naseby's mas-

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sive slopes. As my car slowly wound up its buxom flank the rust-splashed peak of Ironsides Mountain panned into view over two miles away. The two mountains, I now saw, were joined at the shoulders, like Siamese twins, by the panoramic sweep of Roundhead Ridge.

Damp with sweat, I braked at last for a rest on the topmost hump of the crumbling trail. The crest of the ridge was now actually below me and the road ahead curled downward steeply for several hundred yards to meet and disappear into the forest that covered it. The top of Roundhead Ridge, I now could see, is actually a wooded plateau over a mile wide . . . I released my brakes and started down the bone-jarring grade . . .

A quarter-mile beyond Mt. Naseby's slope the tumbled buildings of Roundhead came into view and the road widened to become its single street. I drove slowly through the quiet, tree-shadowed gloom, swinging about the brush and saplings that had invaded the road. A tide of mountain laurel had taken possession of the yards and spaces between the mouldering houses. From either side of the street windows filled with darkness stared like the eyes of skulls.

I braked sharply. A clump of laurel between two houses had quivered in the windless air. I peered intently—called out: "Reverend Brandon?" There was no further movement. I called out again. Nothing . . . The silence was an enemy holding his breath, finger on a trigger . . .

A gelid wind barely stirred. But a hint of pine-smoke rode upon it, and something more—the polluting scent of a distant still.

A twig snapped. Startled, I jerked my hand down on the horn; its blast shattered the silence! A pandemonium of frantic baying exploded over its echoes! The brush shook wildly as an invisible hound charged behind it past the rear of the houses parelleling the street. My ear followed its hysterical ululations as it wheeled north toward Ironsides Mountain, its echoes growing fainter and fainter as it fled . . . I felt like a fool.

THE street made a wide turn as I passed what seemed the last shack along that shadowy, lifeless avenue. Before me appeared a sunlit meadow from which the forest had been cleared for hundreds of yards. At its near edge was a corral enclosing a large, ruminative mule, a ramshackle barn, and a sprawling one-storey farmhouse that was obviously alive.

Seated on the porch was a girl, apparently in her early twenties. Her long, blue-black hair was

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drawn back tightly from her face and gathered by a golden clasp at the nape of her neck. As I got out and approached the porch railing I could see that her features, though classically Greek, were a soft shade of fawnskin. A flowered bodice clung to the curve of breasts and waist, and a gingham skirt flowed to her moccasins.

She seemed to be weaving some kind of brick-red cloth, her hands moving deftly over the frame of a hand-loom. She did not pause nor look around as I halted at the railing, not a yard away from her.

"Miss Brandon?"

She calmly turned, her umber eyes meeting mine without surprise.

"Is your father in?" I smiled.

"I'm weavin' me some stammel for to make him a shirt," she said off-handedly in a pleasant, cornpone contralto, and nodded at the coarse worsted half-filling the loom. She searched my face a moment, glanced around with mischievous caution, and bent toward me confidentially. "I know all the verses to 'Barb'ra Allen'. Lord Randal teached me. He give me his guitar, but ole Greg'ry broke it."

"Old Gregory?" Her mind, I realized, would never match her measurements. A pity.

She smiled and resumed her work with dexterity.

An old English ballad features a 'Lord Randal'; Claney's first name had also been 'Randal'. What, indeed, had he taught her?

"Where *is* your father?" I asked.

"Why?" a voice behind me growled.

I whirled.

He stood not ten feet away, a powerfully built primitive whose long, lank hair fell back to his neck. His hairless face was the color of seasoned oak, the cheekbones broad and high, nostrils flaring, the wide mouth as lipless as a frog's. His brick-red tunic, sleeveless and collarless, was tucked into patched levis, and he was shod, like his daughter, in moccasins. Singularly enough, the eyes set in that dark sculpture were a bright china-blue.

That he is a hybrid I have no doubt—probably a Melungeon, one of those dark people descended from early English settlers who interbred with Indians. The rifle in the crook of his arm, however, was strictly twentieth century.

I wasted no time telling him who I was and why I'd come.

He grunted sardonically and moved closer. "Cynoper, hey? Fust the highway police, then that chicken-haid she'iff—now you. I caint he'p whut that scound'el, Claney, wrote. What makes y'all think I know anything about it?"

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"Well, the storekeeper at Turkey Run—

"Howlett!" His voice was a thunderclap. "He sent you here?"

"Well, he—"

"Lyin' old hypocrite! Aint no such place! Never was!" He paused, glaring. "Old fake's got no more sense'n Balaam's ass!"

"Maybe not," I said placatingly, "but Claney was an experienced engineer. He described this—this town in minute detail."

"He was a liar! Dronken lecher! Got here dronk, stayed dronk, and left dronk! On'y thing he could describe was the bottom of a jug!"

"Well, I didn't know him personally, but whatever it was he *thought* he saw, it—well, it could not be very far from here."

He pondered me, smouldering, for a long moment. "Can you hold your likker?"

The question took me aback. "Well—well, I generally pass out before I get loud."

A ghost of a grin flickered briefly on that grim face. "Come on up, brother." He started for the porch steps. "Set a spell."

I followed, noting the antique dagger sheathed at his hip. The beautifully fashioned hilt seemed more appropriate to a museum wall than a moonshiner's belt.

He stood the rifle against the wall and we sat down on homemade chairs upholstered with criss-crossed strips of rawhide.

"Vashti," he grunted.

The girl arose from her loom, crossed to the door, and disappeared into the house. As my eyes left her I found him staring at me.

"She's—uh—she's very pretty," I said awkwardly, feeling as though I'd been caught in some indecent act.

He looked away stonily.

MY eyes fell and were caught once more by the sight of the dagger at his waistband. When I looked up our eyes met. He drew the blade and handed it to me.

The brightly polished steel was engraved with the Cross of St. George. Both sides of its silver grip were ornamented with basreliefs of lions rampant.

"I'll give you twenty dollars for it," I offered.

He grunted and spat over the rail. "Five will buy y'all a knife heap stouter."

"Fifty."

He heaved a sigh. "One o' the evils I done rooted from my soul, brother, is the love o' money." He held out his hand and I laid the dagger in it. He thrust it back into its sheath as Vashti reappeared. She handed him a stone jug and returned to her loom.

He hooked a finger into the ear of the jug and slung it over his

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shoulder, its mouth at his cheek, and bowed his head: "Thank you kindly, Lord, for smoothin' the path o' righteousness with the oil o' joy. Amen." He turned his lips to the jug and drank deeply. Then he slung it around and set it on my lap.

I took a gulp and gasped, sucking wind against the conflagration exploding inside me. I handed back the jug, eyes brimming.

He pushed it back, frowning. "Y'all didn't take but a picayune sip. Take a real drink, brother!"

Protest was useless; I took another swallow. It was awful stuff.

He nodded approval, accepted the jug, drank again, and set it down on the floor between us. "A taste for pure corn likker giveth a man wisdom," he declared sententiously, and gazed out upon his sunlit meadow in contented satisfaction. "And, verily, a man o' wisdom increaseth strength, saith the Lord. Amen."

"Amen," I sighed, feeling the liquor forge my blood to a glow. After a moment, I inquired, "Where did you get that dagger, Deacon?"

He drew it, holding it flat upon his palm in contemplation. "My pappy, he give it to me."

"Where did *he* get it?"

"From *his pappy;* my grandpappy got it from *his* pappy, and my greatgrandpappy got it from his—" He paused and looked at me speculatively, his pupils curious black pinpoints centered in those opaque, pastel blue irises. "It's been handed down as a tool o' the trade."

"Trade?"

He looked past me dreamily. "I rec'llect my great-grandpap settin' oncommon store by this knife. On'y time he'd use it was when he went off on a job o' work."

"What kind of work?"

His eyes refocussed on me; a corner of his grim mouth twitched. "Upliftin' work, you might say. He'd lift 'em high and drop 'em low. Then he'd cut 'em down." He held his left hand before him as though gripping a taught rope, and with the other, slashed the blade through the imaginary hemp.

I stared. "You mean—he was a hangman?"

His yellow teeth glistened in a grin. "The best-un this county ever had!" He re-sheathed the dagger and sat back, his grin fading. "Until they put in that 'lectric chair," he muttered morosely. "Might as well burn a man in the fiery furnace o' Nebuchadnezzar!" He plucked up the jug, drank, and set it down again, wiping his mouth with the back of a huge, brown hand.

"There was another hangman named 'Brandon'," I ruminated, prowling the wings of memory, searching the casts of some his-

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tory courses I'd taken at the University. "An Englishman. Very famous."

He shook his head. "No furriners in my fam'ly."

"This one lived about 300 years ago."

He glanced at me dryly. "Have another drink, brother. It'll he'p clear your haid."

I did so. The colorless dynamite exploded more gently this time, somehow. It was almost palatable. I passed back the jug.

AS he drank I observed the girl. She was bent at her loom in utter absorption, her body swaying to the cadence of her swift hands. A dormant crater of desire stirred within me as I studied her slim, ripe body. It was impossible to believe that behind that serenely lovely face was actually the mind of a child. She reminded me of a figure out of ancient allegory; I groped, trying to remember. A goddess, perhaps—some dark Diana? Or an Ariadne whose thread led Theseus to safety through the Labyrinth? I could not decide.

The Deacon's skeptical rumble jarred through my pleasant contemplation "Whut made this here Englishman so all-fired famous?"

"What? Oh—Brandon! Well . . . . He's the only Englishman in history who beheaded his own king."

He looked at me. "You mean —cut off his haid?"

"On a winter's day in 1649," I smiled, and once more helped myself to the jug.

He mulled it over for several moments. "You said he was a hangman."

"He was, indeed." I set down the jug and wiped my mouth with a handkerchief. "In those days the rope was for common folk. The captains and the kings, they got the axe. Your namesake was handy with both."

He grunted. "Whut did they do then—make *him* king?" he gibed, obviously thinking that I was putting him on.

As briefly as I could, I sketched out the events that led to and followed the execution of Charles I, the establishment of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell, and the recapture of the throne by Charles II a decade later. Cromwell was dead by then, but he had his bones dug up, draped over Tyburn gallows, and his confederates hanged, drawn, and quartered—among them Thomas Harrison, great-grandfather of William Henry Harrison, ninth president of the United States.

"Some who escaped sailed to America," I concluded. "One shipload got to the Carolinas and moved out here. I figure it was they who built Cynoper."

The Deacon spat over the rail-

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ing. "What bottomland dunghead tole y'all that?"

"Nobody told me!" I bridled. "It's history!"

"History," he snereed. "Store-bought lies! Was never no town called 'Cynoper'." He lifted the jug. "It were called 'Whitehall'." He stared into space, a milky opacity in his eyes giving the illusion of blindness. "Eve'ybody from Roundhead—whut's left o' them—they know. Our folks, they all come from Whitehall 'way back. Useta be a song about it . . ."

"How does it go?" I asked eagerly.

He slung the jug over a shoulder and drank, set it back on the floor and glowered at me. "Howlett, he knows it were called Whitehall! Ole Judas!" He plucked his rifle from against the wall and used it to thrust himself to his feet. "Nobody knows no more," he growled bitterly, "nobody remembers. Nobody *wants* to remember." He stared across the clearing. "All of 'em got as much Injun blood as I got, but me'n Vashti, we ride into Turkey Run, into Pine Tar, we aint good enough to eat in their cafes, or pray in their churches, or even to set in their stinkin' outhouses!"

I glanced at the girl. She worked as though we did not exist.

Brandon surged to the porch railing and grasped a pillar to steady himself. "May the cynoper bury 'em with the burial of an ass!" he roared. "May they burn in hell forever!"

I arose and followed him unsteadily to the railing. "Cynoper. What's 'cynoper', Deacon?"

He glared at me, then turned to Ironside Mountain's murrey-mottled peak. "Devil's vomit!" He pointed the rifle at it, holding it by its forestock as easily as an ordinary man would a pistol. "It comes f'om there, outen the bowels o' hell!"

"Cynoper," I repeated stupidly—and its meaning sauntered into my mind as though it had never been invited: cinnabar! 'Cynoper' was Middle English—obsolete for centuries! "That would be mercury ore," I said aloud.

HE leaned the rifle against the rail, disregarding my observation, and from his pants pocket drew a string-bag of tobacco and a charred corncob which he proceeded to fill.

"How about guiding me there, Deacon? Right now." I extracted my wallet. "I'll make it worth your while."

He lit his pipe and considered me through a nimbus of reasty smoke. "It won't be wuth yourn. All you'll see is an abomination o' broken stones and poisoned ground." He paused, studying me thoughtfully. "Unless—unless

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you've eaten the fruit of the Serpent."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you'll see Sodom rebuilt, and your own damnation." He grinned like a drunken tiger, eyes glistening like polished blue jade. "But I purely doubt it. You got the innocence of a thick haid."

"Thanks. What do you see when you go there?"

The grin faded. He took the pipe from his mouth. "With me it don't matter. I been anointed by the Lord God Jehovah and the gods of the Indian nations. It is the tabernacle of my fathers. I hold dominion there." His face hardened. "You think that's comical?"

I wiped the smile from my face. "Not at all. It's very interesting. What about old Gregory? Does he hang around there, too?"

He sagged against the pillar, replacing the pipe in his mouth. "Where'd y'all hear about him?"

"Claney's journal. He mentioned seeing a black hound near Cynoper—pardon me, Whitehall. He thought, perhaps, this ghost dog folks call 'ole Greg'ry' is actually the dog he saw—only it wasn't a ghost, but some old hound gone wild, probably." I was studiedly casual. "What do you think?"

He turned his head aside and spat. "I think he changed his mind later on."

"How do you know that?"

"He's daid, aint he?"

I couldn't help laughing. "Come now, Deacon. You should be encouraging folks to come here to study those ruins instead of trying to scare 'em off with all this silly booger-talk. It could put Roundhead back on the map again!"

He pushed himself from against the pillar, taking the pipe from his mouth, his glare taking on a greenish glow, like plutonium at the bottom of milky-blue waters.

But my valor was 100 proof. "Claney's death was an accident! You know that as well as I do!"

"Shore 'nough?" he mocked. "Maybe I ought to, seeing as how it was me who found his corpse."

I stared. I hadn't known that.

"Jeep on top o' him, his haid gone. Couldn't find it nowhere." He struck a match and relit his pipe. "Like you say, an accident. Jest like all the rest."

"The rest? What do you mean, 'the rest'?"

"Like the last preacher we had —seminary man he was. Claimed he found an old walled fort back in the hills. Took off for Turkey Run to spread the word. Never did git there. Found his bones later. She'iff figgered a painter et him." He blew a gust of smoke. "Funny thing—couldn't find his skull nowhere."

I grinned and extracted a bill.

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"I'll give you twenty dollars to take me there." I added, "Throw in that dagger and I'll make it a hundred."

He sighed. "I'll take y'all for nothing—fust thing in the mornin'." He reached out and plucked the bill from my fingers. "Lodgin' for the night'll cost you twenty."

"I've got to start back tomorrow. Why not now?"

He glanced up at the sun. "Won't be enough daylight. It's rough goin', brother, and we won't be drivin'. You've got time. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." He picked up his rifle and swung off the porch. "Come on, brother. Y'all can he'p me fill jugs."

I followed. "Wait! It's now or never. I'll go alone if I have to!"

He paused and turned, taking the pipe from his mouth.

"Just show me how to get there and I'll consider you've earned that twenty," I said.

He shook his head mournfully. "You won't listen, will you, brother?" He sighed. "Like the Book says, there's more hope of a fool than a scound'el wise in his own conceit."

"Amen. Now how do I get there?"

"The quickest way is thataway." He pointed to Ironsides Mountain. "Jest keep old pintohaid afore you. 'Bout half a mile look for a spring. Kingsblood Crick runs offen it. Jest foller it through Axehead Gap."

"Axehead—? How will I know —" I began.

"You'll know," he cut in. "I'll give you a canteen o' water."

"I won't be there long enough to get thirsty. Thanks, anyway."

He looked at me a moment. "The water there is poison. Don't touch it. If night ketches you, stay where you are. I'll fetch you."

I smiled thanks and turned to the porch where the girl sat. "So long, Miss Brandon. I'll see you on my way back."

She neither looked up or paused, plying her loom in tireless tranquillity. I started to speak again, hesitated, changed my mind. Lovely as she was, there was that about her that made me a little uneasy.

I remembered now of whom she reminded me: one of the three Fates. She was Lachesi, weaving the threads of human destiny . . .

Pleased with my own fancy, I waved them both farewell and sallied forth to seek a ghost-town named for a long-vanished palace on whose balcony an English king had been beheaded by an executioner named Gregory Brandon . . .

THE spring-fed pool lay in the shadows of laurel and hemlock. Crystalline capilliaries

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purled from its edges, flowing north to join in a yard-wide vein. I followed its visceral windings, often cutting across its convolutions to speed the way. It began to bear slightly to the west.

After a mile or so the forest began to dwindle, the trees becoming sparser, stunted, their branches out-thrust at tortured angles. Sunlight shone on barren ground leprous with scabs of red-brown mineral.

I scooped up a handful of the granular stuff. If this is what Brandon meant by 'cynoper', I could understand why Claney had not mentioned it. What he had mentioned, however, was monazite, an igneous form of thorium ore. This was it.

Its level of radioactivity no doubt is low, but enough to explain the arboreal monstrosities that fringe the forest. Thinly clothed in malformed leaves, trunks squat and tumorous, they range the ridge like a troop of trolls.

Dyed by the red mineral, the quickening stream bore more westward still, hissing and bubbling like pink champagne. Ironsides Mountain loomed almost directly over me, its diseased head striated and crusted with unwholesome blotches of monazite red, feldspar white, and lava black.

As it turned due west the creek unwound for a final rush and plunged over the ridge in a billowing cloud of rosy mist.

After some hesitation I eased over the brink and down the steep slope, parallel to the stream. The shout of the torrent filled my ears as it cascaded down a staircase of rusty rocks. Weird little shrubs with skewbald leaves offered treacherous handholds as I slid, rolled, and sometimes avalanched down the seemingly endless, stone-spiked incline.

Bruised and lacerated, I tumbled at last through a canopy of matted brush to the floor of a deep and narrow ravine. Chilled by the spray of the adjacent falls, I lay in the gloom, exhausted.

It was necessary to arise, if only to keep from freezing. The stones that paved the crevasse were loose and slimy beneath my feet, and so deeply laid that they swallowed the falls. But I could clearly hear the music of the waters as I followed it along the winding gorge. Still, the going was slow, the footing precarious.

The ravine looped and wound interminably. I thought of rattlesnakes and copperheads who might find it ideal as an air-conditioned retreat. After what seemed like ten miles (but was probably only two) I began to feel like an idiot following an invisible piper. Had I been sent on a wild-ghost chase?

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The walls of the labyrinth suddenly flared out around the next bend, opening into what might be called a canyon, narrow and high. The unobstructed sky was lovely, patches of rich blue between tatters of combed fleece. The stony moraine flattened beneath my feet as I moved into the canyon. The stream emerged, red as blood.

The high wall of abasalt bluff blocked the canyon's opposite end some fifty yards ahead. Down its middle, as though riven by a monstrous axe, was a V-shaped cleft. The waters gathered at its base and rushed on through.

I entered the dank corridor, the red rapids tearing at my thighs. The slimy walls crowded me as I floundered and stumbled but kept on going.

The flood flung me out into a dazzle of sunlight, the waters flattening over an apron of rock, then pouring like a bloody sheet over its edge into the red sand ten feet below. But I hardly noticed.

Invisible centipedes crawled my spine as I stood gaping, trapped in wonder, at the sight before me: a frontier fortress not a quarter-mile away, framed against a desert of coarse red sand over a mile across. Its walls were high palisades of tall, pointed logs, with sentry towers at each of the corners. Half-open at one end was a huge, timber gate.

I dropped to the sand from one side of the rock and trudged toward the walls, my garments clinging like a wet shroud, my shoes soggy. I shivered, though the sun was warm, and nausea churned within me, but I kept on going, hypnotized by the sight before me.

As I reached the walls they seemed to tilt. I thrust out a hand to steady them, palm against the stony log. . . . My vertigo passed. But now I knew. Claney had written that the walls had petrified and turned to stone. It was the truth.

I ENTERED the gate. Narrow galleries of rough-hewn boards ran along the tops of the walls, with access ladders standing against them. Interspersed along the base of the walls were stables and barracks built of logs, with cabins and sheds in more central areas.

All were stone, their substance mineralized, as though touched by some cut-rate Midas.

The central stronghold was rather different, however, for its walls were built of natural stone. It stood in the center of the fortress courtyard, about a hundred feet long and sixty wide. Its granite walls were ten feet tall and slitted with vertical firing embrasures which commanded the entire area.

The stronghold had but a sin-

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gle door at a corner opposite the palisades gate. As I approached I saw that it was hammered from a single plate, probably bronze, melted from a naval cannon.

I grasped the knurled handle —hesitated. My hand fell away. Disquiet chilled me. I was being observed. I could feel it! I looked around.

The emptiness, the brooding stillness should have reassured me. My eyes wandered watchfully, searching the dark doorways and windows of the barracks and cabins. I might have inspected each building were it not for the red sand that carpeted the entire area. It bore no other footprints save mine. Apparently not even the Deacon came here very often.

When I turned again to the door I became aware that a section of wall adjoining it did not match the rest; it had been obviously torn open and poorly rebuilt, the stones broken, the mortaring crude.

Suspicion became instant certainty. That thieving ghoul, Brandon! He'd looted the place! The door had been too narrow to carry out the stuff, so he'd broken the wall!

I shook with sick fury, yanked back on the door, and nearly fell as it suddenly opened, squealing.

A narrow corridor vanished down the length of the stronghold into what was probably a ground-level store-room. Before me rose a stone stairway. I mounted six steps into an anteroom some ten feet wide, but whose length was the width of the building itself. Sunlight streamed in through a trio of slits in the western wall, picking out an empty powder keg and musket balls strewn over the puncheon floor. Gun-brackets bolted into the stone were empty. A Gothic archway opened into the main chamber through a wall of massive, hand-hewn boards.

Neither floor nor wall, nor any other organic matter sheltered from the mountain's chemistry (as I soon discovered) had petrified. Oddly enough, there was little dust within the stronghold.

I took a step through the archway, and stopped short with a sudden breath, mesmerized, looking around slowly.

A central aisle ran some ninety feet down the length of the room. Along either side of it, clear to the granite walls, stood disordered ranks of 17th century furniture piled with household goods, pottery, dishes, silver, lamps, a few musical instruments.

I sagged against the archway frame, staring, as amazed as Balboa at his first sight of the Pacific, as avid as Cortez with his roomful of gold. My heart pounded and the room swam. Fingertips against my closed

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eyes, I pressed against the throbbing in my skull. This was no time to get sick! No time, no time . . . not *now!*

Someone whispered. My eyes popped open.

The whisper multiplied and swelled to a hissing sussuration of voices rising from every part of the room. I stared about wildly, seeing no one, my ears filled with their urgent, pleading, cursing, unintelligible bedlam! But I was alone—there was no one else, no one.

It must be delirium, I thought. Fever. I'd fight it, I wouldn't let it stop me. . . . Near me at the edge of the aisle was a heavy chair. I sank into it. It will go away, I thought, and then I'll be all right. . . .

Almost immediately the whispering faded, trailing away into the gathering dusk.

FOR long minutes I huddled there, parched and nauseous, feet burning, muscles aching. Presently the tempo of my heart abated and I thrust myself up, grasping the back of the chair for support. My fingers clutched carved wood. I looked down at it. It was a stout chair of noble construction, its heavy legs joined by scalloped stretchers. Single panels of heavy leather upholstered seat and back. On such a chair Oliver Cromwell might have sat in state.

My sand-filled shoes were as heavy as wet concrete. I kicked them off. Immediately I rose an inch off the floor. I floated, drifting giddily, like a joyous drunkard marvelling at a suspension of natural laws. My socks went next and I slid on air down the aisle, pausing briefly to admire a primitive pair of chandeliers that hung by chains from the massive roof-tree beam above. They were simply broad, black hoops of iron, seven feet or more across. Scores of thick, half-burned yellow candles stood on flanges around their rims.

Pleasantly wafted by ions of whim, I moved without effort from piece to piece as each intrigued my eager eye. My hands caressed rich upholstery of leather and fabric, stroked oak and walnut cunningly carved in roundels and strapwork; the colors of a tapestry awakened a responsive glow; I fingered a krummhorn with amused delight and blew a raucous note on its still pliable reed; I tried to tune a long-necked lute but gave up when a string snapped.

In the drawers of an ebony cabinet I found a numerous set of table silver with two-pronged forks and hilted knives, their hafts set with pink jasper. Atop another in French lacquer was a bracket-clock whose hands had stopped, dramatically enough, exactly at twelve. It bore the

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honored hall-mark of Thomas Tompion, father of English clock-making. I sought and found the tiny drawer set in its base, and in it a winding key.

When I wound the clock it came to life, to my delight, with a loud, allegro tick.

The cabinet doors, set with tiny, leaded panes, opened easily. On a shelf within lay a flintlock pistol mounted in gold, its butt inlaid with mother-of-pearl, its hammer an iron serpent's head holding the flint between its jaws. On the shelf below lay a pouch of shot and a powderhorn that felt half-full. It was the only weapon I was able to find.

If Brandon had taken the rest of the guns, then why not this rare item as well? Or the silver flagons, the clock, and other bric-a-brac? Since he'd apparently not taken the furniture, why had he broken the wall to widen the doorway?

But, of course, he hadn't. It was as though I'd known it all along. It had been done by the sons of they who built this place. When death spewed down from the retching mountain they'd brought their household treasures here, smashed a section of wall to move them in, repaired it hastily, and fled with their guns and families. No doubt, they hoped one day to return and retrieve their goods.

But here, incredibly, it remained, perhaps for over twenty decades, protected by local superstition and the bactericide of radiation. The chemicals that had rained on them had mummified and mineralized the palisades and outer structures.

What other explanation could there be?

A gleam of porcelain caught my eye. I floated down the aisle, pushed aside some furniture, and stood beside a banqueting table. Its regal length was piled with a magnificent service of dinnerware. Beneath the glaze of every dish were the typical blue dashes that proclaimed them Majolica! Italian ware designed for 17th century English taste!

You can imagine with what excitement I examined those glistening plates and platters, cups and cruets, chocolate pitchers, posnets, potagers, and trenchers. . . . A sumptuous bowl, big as a basin, portrayed a pop-eyed Belshazzar with a baleful glare, an agonized Daniel, and a Moving Finger fatefully writing 'Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin'. It was marvellous!

THE dusk had deepened. I wondered if Brandon would come before night fell. I hoped he'd wait till morning; I preferred taking inventory here alone. Besides—how could I leave this treasure unguarded, even for a day or two?

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The airy cloud on which I stood dropped beneath me like a gallow-strap. The room pitched like a gale-struck ship and I clutched at the back of a nearby chair, stubbing bare toes on a crowding stool. The room righted in a moment or two and I staggered into the aisle on jellied knees, teeth chattering with mortal chill. The huge dark eye of the giant fireplace drew me hypnotically to the end of the room.

It was set into the base of a massive chimney of mortar and stone, ten feet wide, that mounted the granite wall. High above the hearth, stretching across the chimney's width, was an oaken mantel adorned with a pair of pewter candlesticks, a calumet, and two Indian war-clubs with basalt heads. Above the mantel hung five long loops of Indian scalps linked together by their long, black hair. Against the fireplace leaned still another trophy: an Indian lance with a long, slender, chipped-flint head, its shaft ornamented with eagle feathers.

I used it to probe the thick bed of ashes that covered the stone grate. But the few bits of charred wood I uncovered were precious little fuel for a fire with which I might warm myself.

My eyes darted about the room, but there was nothing I saw that I could force myself to burn. The mantel once more caught my eye. It had been cut, apparently, from a heavy table. Its value was minimum.

I dropped the lance and tried to pull the mantel down. But the hand-wrought angles bolted into solid rock held it firm. I shook it, swung my weight upon it, shook it again, more desperately. A candlestick toppled off. But that was all. Exhausted, shivering, I sank upon the hearth, hugging my knees . . .

The candlestick lay beside me. I picked it up, nothing the two-inch stub of candle protruding from the mass of wax congealed about the cup. I searched my pockets and found a booklet of matches. But it was water-soaked, useless . . .

My chill suddenly vanished. Fever flamed through me. I struggled to my feet, tore off my jacket, loosened my tie, and opened my collar. Thirst corroded the lining of my throat. I cursed my own stupidity for not accepting the water the Deacon had offered. No doubt he'd been here many times. He knew . . .

I PLOWED aimlessly about the great chamber, peering into empty silver tankards and flagons, tipping murrhine vases, shaking ancient stoneware crocks and bottles in the vain hope that he might have left some water, coffee, or even just a swallow or two of his foul liquor. . . .

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The interior of the room began to blend in a grey amalgam of shadow. Light from the embrasures diluted the deepening twilight even more thinly. An urgent need for fire—and light—struck me with nearly as great a poignancy as my need for water. Somewhere here must surely be that common 17th century household item, a tinderbox with flint and steel!

I flung open drawers, opened cabinet doors, plunged and squeezed my way through the ranks of stored furniture in a hurried search . . .

The Book gave me pause. It lay on a parquet table, massive in the muted light. A King James first edition!

I opened it. The ornate lettering of the dedicatory page stood out in the twilight black and clear: 'To the Most High and Mighty Prince, HENRY, by the grace of God—' I paused, staring. 'HENRY'! I read on: 'King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc.'

As you well know, there is only one Henry to which a Bible in the English language could be dedicated: Henry VIII! Far rarer than a King James, it was a Miles Coverdale Bible!

The title-page, ornamented by six illuminated panels, confirmed this. It was, indeed, the first Bible ever printed in the English language, translated and published by Bishop Coverdale in 1575—74 years before the King James version!

Excitement shook me more than fever. It was complete, from Genesis to Revelation! The *only* complete Coverdale in existence!

I opened it at random to the 11th chapter of Second Samuel illustrated by a woodcut of King David leering at a naked Bathsheba. I had to peer closely to make out the details. . . .

Those matches I'd thrown away—they might burn if dried!

I got up and headed for the hearth, stubbed a bare toe on the uneven puncheons, swore . . . The busy ticking of the clock seemed to swell in volume as it spoke to me . . .

The pistol!

I turned and hurried up the aisle to the cabinet on which the clock stood, seized weapon, powder-horn, and leather pouch of shot. Thus armed, I padded back to the fireplace. Shakily I trickled a test measure into the pistol's pan.

Some explosives grow touchy with age, but this coarse black stuff—would it even burn?

I cocked the hammer, pointed it blindly at the shadows, and pulled the trigger. There was a flash, a flare, and a stunning boom! The pistol leaped from my hand to a tinkle of crockery, and clattered on the floor.

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I stood coughing in a cloud of black smoke. The gun had been loaded! Who could have dreamed —? What had I done?

The great Mojolica bowl lay in pieces.

I could have wept, but there was no time for tears. . . . The candle broke off when I tried to free it from the candlestick. I laid it down and poured a mound of powder on the hearth. Then I primed and cocked the pistol, held the pan tilted close beside the powder on the hearth, and pulled the trigger. The priming flashed and I spilled its burning grains upon the heap. It ignited with a yellow, sizzling flame. I had plenty of time to light the candle.

I dragged a box-chair beneath the hanging candelabras and stood upon it, raising high the burning candle impaled upon the Indian lance; one by one, my arm shaking, I touched its flame to the yellow candles circling each iron chandelier. It took awhile and, more than once, I nearly fell. . . . When the job was done I descended, gaping upward like an astonished Merlin who'd conjured up a spell more wondrous than he'd expected.

THE black iron hoops shone like giant coronets, the scores of burning candles filling the room with a pallid, almost eldritch light. But more amazing were the myriad strands of relucent gems that lined the ceiling where ancient resin caulking had crystallized in countless drops of smouldering amber.

The lingering stench of burnt gunpowder soon yielded to another scent, edged yet pleasant. Its source, I soon realized, was the pale smoke that rose from the lighted candles, a perfume incorporated into the wax.

I inhaled deeply. A mounting euphoria honed my every sense to a feather-edge. My fever drained away, my thirst subsided. I stretched my arms above my head to expand my lungs and drink in more of the vibrant fragrance. I closed my eyes and let it possess me. It was strength, it was youth, it was life!

It was a drug. I knew that well enough. They who built this place and made those candles had been pragmatists. Satan was not shunned so much that they could not borrow from the pharmacology of the heathen—probably by the same means that they had 'borrowed' those scalps.

Sibilant whispers rose about me. My eyes opened. My fever was gone. This was no illusion. I heard them clearly, a sad sussuration of countless voices rising like a rustle of dead leaves. It seemed that they gathered in the aisle about me; I backed away until I stood upon the hearth, staring up the shadowy

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corridor . . . The whispering died away.

As it did, shadows began to fill the aisle, coalescing into form and substance until they were, it seemed, the very stuff of flesh and blood! Yet they were strangely merged, somehow, in a diaphanous amalgam of buckskin tunics and threadbare coats, patched breeches and stained dresses, sad eyes and haggard faces.

I lifted the lance as my staff of authority, and planted it before me at parade-rest. By some schizoid conjuration I was suddenly ten feet tall, looking down into their faces.

My voice echoed through the room, "Well, what are you waiting for—harps to be passed around? You're in the wrong place, friends!"

They stood silently, wearily. The clock ticked with sharp-edged clarity, but through it I could hear their breathing. What were they waiting for? Why had they come? Who was I to stand before them in amused arrogance? Thus reason whispered, but its voice was scarcely audible. I knew who I was! And so did they! There was nothing in heaven or earth undreamt of in my philosophy. I was the Devil's deputy. And they—they were the ragged ghosts of past failure, impotent, docile.

Britain had been theirs. They might have built the first great world republic, a modern state that would never have lost America. What had Cromwell said? 'Give me men who know what they fight for, and love what they know!' But they had forgotten what they had known; they had not loved what they had won. The lions had become sheep. They hungered for a master.

"Who speaks for you?" I cried, and looked about, searching their amorphous features from which, strangely, I could not pick one separate face. "Colonel Hacker? Chaplain Peters? No one? Very well." I slammed the butt of the lance upon the floor. "This meeting is adjourned. Go!"

They remained.

I shouted, "You heard me! Get to hell out of here!"

THE candlelight that filled the room turned a dusky rose; their faces became lurid. Serpents of blue St. Elmo's fire took shape along the tops of the walls, undulating liquidly. Myriad strands of glowing amber were alchemized into dazzling diamonds that lit the ceiling from peak to eaves with fiery brilliance. Liquid balls of blue fire rolled up and down the chandelier chains. The candles snake-danced around their flanges, streaming bannerets of multicolored flames.

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I stared, enthralled. The drug I breathed had, no doubt, fathered this mirage. The knowledge did nothing to dim my delight. Illusion is the only reality, visions the deeper truth. If the universe appeared as it really is, invisible electrons whirling in nothingness, we'd see nothing.

My gaze lowered. I was almost alone. My audience had vanished —save for one imposing figure who, I'm sure, had not been among the rest.

He stood in the middle of the aisle, directly beneath the chandeliers, his stern face livid in the sanguine light. His dark hair hung, Cavalier-style, to the collar of a rich, camlet cloak beneath which shone the engraved metal of a dress cuirass. A down-swept moustache adorned his upper lip, a tuft of beard the lower.

I'd seen that face before, life-size, hanging in a frame somewhere.

Left hand cupped over his saber-hilt, he was reading a document held before him, mouthing the words grimly. But they sounded as distant whispers. He seemed to grow taller as he read. And, as he grew, so did his voice, a flat, Devonshire accent reaching across time and space. . . .

". . . and being satisfied that you are accomplice to the aforesaid unnatural, cruel, and bloody murder, this Court doth adjudge you guilty, and condemns you to death by hanging, drawing, and quartering. You shall be drawn on a hurdle to Tyburn gallows and hanged by the neck. While yet alive you shall be cut down, and your bowels and privy parts cut out and thrown into a fire before your eyes. Then shall you be beheaded and your body cut into four parts and impaled on pikes above the Tower walls."

Monk!

The name clanked in my memory like a deadened bell. General George Monk, Duke of Albemarle! He who had restored Charles II to his father's throne. Peter Lely had done his portrait after the Restoration. It had been included, you may recall, in one of our auctions some years ago.

He lowered the document and fixed me with a wintry stare. "And may the Lord God have mercy on your soul."

I took a breath. An interesting phenomenon. Curiously, without having been aware of it happening, I realized that we were now both about the same size. Except, of course, I knew that he wasn't really there. Still, it was rather fun playing the game.

"I hate to tell you this, General, but you have no jurisdiction here. You're really nothing, an ambassador of dust!"

He remained motionless, glaring, his right hand still on his saberhilt.

I swallowed my disquietude.

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It isn't easy to reason away the evidence of one's own eyes. "So—go back to where you came from. Keep practicing those death sentences. You're getting real good at it." I paused, lifted the lance, and slammed its butt on the floor. "Now beat it!"

But still he stood, his cold face set, as unblinking as a figure in a wax museum.

In a burst of irritation, I flung back the lance and hurled it at him with all my might! It arced over his head and thudded into the timber wall, high above the archway peak.

He vanished. Where he'd stood was only the box-chair beneath the chandeliers.

Vanished also were the infernal glow, the St. Elmo's fire, the coruscating canopy of crusted jewels (suddenly transformed back to amber beads, each smouldering with its drop of light). And the candles were back in their accustomed places, their golden spear-points motionless.

I SEEMED to glide as down a slope of dreams to where the lance protruded high above the archway peak. Just beneath it, hanging edge downward against the wall, was an ornament I'd not seen before: an executioner's broad-axe, dark with time's corrosion. I stared up, fascinated. What blood had that metal drunk?

The distant crack of a rifle-shot, its echoes snapping from peak to peak, spun me around. I swivel-hipped my way through the furniture and peered blindly through a window-slit.

A flat rustle of wet fabric sounded behind me. I turned sharply.

Vashti Brandon stood in the aisle, calmly contemplating me. Her dress, soaked to the waist in red-dyed waters, clung to her hips. Long strands of her black hair had worked loose of the clasp behind her neck.

Without a word she continued toward the fireplace. I called after her, but she did not pause until I'd caught up.

"Where's your father?"

She nodded in the direction from which I'd heard the shot. Her dress, I now saw, was more than wet and dishevelled; it was ripped in several places, her beige-tinted skin visible through the gaping tears.

"What's he shooting at?"

She fingered my tie curiously. "That warn't his gun. I hid it."

"You hid it!"

"He was fixin' to kill you." She smiled, running fingertips over my cheek and across my lips. "I *tole* him y'all were no gov'ment spy."

I pulled her arm away. "Government spy!" I stared, bewildered. But not for long. It dawned on me: his still had been

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raided! That had to be it! I almost laughed.

She pressed against me when I asked her if that was what the shooting was all about; I felt her shiver. "Is that what happened?" I persisted.

"I'm cold." Her body warmth filtered through her wet clothes, balsam scented. I put my arms about her. It was a clean, dispassionate smell.

"You'll feel better soon. You've been here before, haven't you?"

She relaxed. "A fire'd be nice," she smiled.

I let go and looked around cusorily. "Nothing here we can afford to burn. What will happen to you if your father is sent to prison?"

She shrugged and kicked off her mocassins. "They cain't ketch him. Not ole Greg'ry." Amusement danced in her gold-flecked eyes.

"Why do you call him that? His name is Richard, isn't it?"

She smiled, and suddenly whirled, executing a pirouette, ballooning her wet skirts.

Three quick shots cracked out —not so distantly this time— their echoes ricocheting. She halted, her skirts winding about her with a dank slap, and froze, listening.

I returned to my lookout post. The lights would surely draw Brandon's pursuers—even if they lost his trail. It was a bothersome thought. I kept an ear cocked for the sounds of their approach. The measureless tick of the clock mingled with the whispered drone of the falls to give substance to the silence.

A crackle of fire broke the spell. I looked around.

The fireplace was filled with dancing flames! Before it, spread upon the floor was a bed consisting of a score or more of chair and settee cushions. She lay across them, facing the fire, chin pillowed in her cupped hands, elbows resting on the cushions, her plume of hair flung out beside her. Fireglow danced on her naked body.

She turned her head as I approached. "I done built us a fire," she announced casually.

Her dress hung drying from a corner of the mantel, weighted there by one of the war-clubs. The fire, I soon perceived, was feeding on the wreckage of a fine buhl desk. I was appalled.

"What have you done! You idiot! How—how did you smash that without my hearing you?"

Her only reaction was a thoughtful stare. "Ole Greg'ry done it," she said indifferently, and waved an arm at a corner adjacent to the fireplace. "Rest of it's yonder."

A PILE of rugs and bric-a-brac had been pushed off an ornate chest concealed there. Its

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upraised lid revealed remnants of the shattered cabinet together with a kerosene can whose spout was stoppered by a small potato. An end section divided from the rest of the interior of the priceless 'woodbox' was stocked with more exotic items: dried skins of snakes, lizards, a couple of bats, sheaves of various kinds of herbs, one bowl brimming with animal teeth, another with rattles from rattlesnake tails, and a corked bottle of some oily substance. All these were obviously part of the Deacon's stock-in-trade as local shaman.

I kicked the chest-lid shut. "I hope you enjoy that fire, sweetheart. It's the most expensive one you'll ever see!"

She'd undone her hair and was on her knees, seated on her calves, as I returned. She held up a large, tortoise-shell comb. "Comb my hair," she smiled. Her eyes were langurous, her smile inviting.

I pondered her. She was undeniably voluptuous, but with a trim curve of supple muscle which, while beautifully feminine, published the kind of graceful power one finds magnified in a young lioness. Even more disturbing was an innocence completely outside the sphere in which moral distinctions and judgement apply. She was as amoral as Eve before the Fall.

"Comb my hair," she repeated, putting the comb into my hand. It was backed by solid gold along whose length ran a frieze of cupids in basrelief. Cellini himself might have created such a bauble.

"Where'd you find this?"

She hooked fingers into my waist-band and pulled me to my knees. She arched her torso, arms out-thrust behind her, and shook loose her hair. I drew the comb through the thick, lustrous tresses.

"You clothes'll dry a heap faster if you hang 'em by the fire," she suggested.

"Suppose your father walks in?"

She pivoted around to lie on her side at my knees. "He cain't. He's been hit."

"How do you know?"

She sank upon her back, looking up at me, and sighed, firelight catching flecks of gold in her dark eyes. "I know."

I cupped one of her breasts in my palm, and drew my hand slowly down over satiny convexities, waiting for the onset of the desire I'd felt when first we'd met and she'd been fully clothed. But any passion I might have felt was drowned in apprehension.

She studied me thoughtfully. "I reckon I ain't so pretty."

"You're very pretty. You're beautiful. But even if your father has been wounded, as you say, those officers could barge in

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here at any moment to investigate."

She shook her head positively. "They caint."

"Why not?"

She smiled mischievously. "Don't y'all fret y'self." She reached for my belt and unbuckled it, then pulled it from around my waist. She fumbled for buttons; not finding any, she turned on her side for a closer view, searching puzzledly. I opened the zipper. She watched in surprise, then pulled it up and down herself, fascinated.

"Haven't you ever seen a zipper before?"

She looked up. "Whut?"

"A zipper."

She slid it up and down a few more times. "Ain't that sump'n? How's that li'l ole thing work?"

I LOOKED at her a moment, then got up, removed the rest of my clothes, and hung them from the mantel beside hers. She turned towards me as I padded back and lay down beside her. Her arms locked about me with sudden, fierce passion. I gasped, unable to breathe.

"Take it easy!" I struggled loose.

She relaxed, smiling up inquiringly.

"What are you—a boa-constrictor?" I fondled her for awhile. It was no use. I sighed, "What do you put in your hair?"

She looked puzzled. "My hair?"

"You smell like a Christmas tree."

She nestled against me contentedly. "You smell good, too, even sweaty." Her fingertips walked down my flank. I felt them tickle suggestively. But there was no effect. I was, frankly, embarrassed. And a little desperate.

"Vashti, if Federal officers should walk in here—"

"They caint. I done tole you."

"Yes, I know. You 'done tole' me. But if they did—Vashti, how old are you?"

She shrugged.

"You mean you don't know?" I sat up, feeling like a jackass. Of course she was old enough! I didn't have to pretend that I was worried about violating the laws of statutory rape, or about anything else in order to excuse my lack of ardor. I didn't have to explain a damned thing! "Have you got a dry cigarette—no, I don't suppose you have."

She rose to her knees in a single, smoothly coordinated movement, and considered me thoughtfully. "Smokin' cigarettes is sinful."

I looked at her. "Sinful?"

"That's whut the Bible say."

"The Bible? You read it in the Bible?"

Her eyes fell. "I ain't learnt readin' yet." She added quickly, "Greg'ry reads it real good."

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"Yeah . . . Do you know what the Bible says about what we're doing now?"

She looked away. "We ain't done nothin' yet."

I stood up. "I'm sorry. It's been a rough day. I—" I hesitated as our eyes met. "It's been a—a rough day," I repeated, feeling absolutely ridiculous, standing naked before her, trying to apologize.

"S'pose I put on my dress and let you undress me, slow-like?"

"Who taught you that?"

She shrugged.

"It won't help. Thanks, anyway."

She searched my face, then reached out and picked up my belt. She doubled it and put the ends in my hand. Wide-eyed, lips parted, she crouched at my feet, looking up . . . Current tingled through me from toe-tips to hair-roots. My temples began to pound . . . I looked down at her, slowly lifted the belt, and brought it down with a crack. She flung her arms about my knees with a stifled cry. A lurid weal slanted across that golden back. I dropped the belt, my knees buckling. I sank to the cushions, carrying her down with me . . .

A DISTANT gunshot echoed along the rim of night, awakening me. The far-off baying of a running hound lifted the hair astride my neck. I turned to Vashti lying beside me.

She was gone.

I sprang up, calling her name. The fire was nearly out. Her dress, mocassins, and hair-tie were nowhere in sight. . . . My trousers, shirt, and shorts were dry and warm. The baying stopped as I started to dress.

I picked up the splendid, gold-backed comb and put it away in a table-drawer. Then I lifted the cushions off the floor and replaced them on the chairs and settees from which they'd been taken, examining each one for possible damage. It had been criminal to use them so. . . .

There boomed another, closer shot. The ululation rose again, and getting nearer. It suddenly stopped.

I retrieved pistol and powder-horn, and poured in a full load from the horn's measuring spout; I rammed home a ball from the pouch of shot with the rod bracketed beneath the barrel; then I primed the pan and thrust the weapon into my belt.

Brandon, wounded or not, was obviously still on the run. I prayed that he wouldn't be taken alive. He probably had no legal claim to this place—but his death would guarantee it. Vashti would be no problem.

I wondered if the candles would last the night and looked up. Their substance seemed quite

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undiminished. It was reassuring—yet something to wonder on. It seemed that I'd slept at least an hour. I looked at my wristwatch. Its second-sweep circled normally, but its hands stood at ten past six—almost the exact moment I'd arrived here. Annoyed, I strode up the aisle and consulted the bracket clock.

Its hands pointed to a quarter to seven—exactly where I'd set them.

Baffled, I started back toward the fireplace, halting before the parquet table. The Coverdale Bible lay spread open where I'd left it. I sank into the chair before it. . . .

In text and style the Coverdale cannot match the King James version. But not even the old Bishop's stertorous translation could dim the music of David's lyrics, nor cool the erotica of Solomon's song. The fugues and toccatas of a tormented Job still rang with majesty. The tribal ferocity of warrior and king, the symphonic wrath of barbarian priest, still held me in their savage spell. . . . The hucksters of heaven were less exciting, but how well they sold their bill of goods, those apostolic pitchmen, driving a jackass world their way, armed only with the stick of a hypogeal hell and the painted carrot of a fair Messiah!

A chill bit through the windless air. I got up, found my coat, and put it on. The dim sound of a footfall from below suddenly gripped me. I listened, rigid.

Footsteps, slow and weary, scuffed up the six stone steps; they paused to rest as they reached the top, then continued on across the anteroom floor.

Brandon appeared, pausing in the open archway, his gaunt face streaming with sweat.

"Deacon! I'd given you up!" I cried with forced heartiness, and moved toward him. "What happened? What were those shots?"

He sagged against the archway frame, resting, his eyes, like pale blue jade, fixed upon me. "Y'all wouldn't be knowin' about that, would you, brother?"

His irony disturbed me. "No. How could I? I've been here since sundown."

He studied me with deadly impassivity. Save for his dagger he was unarmed. But he was sucking in strength with every breath. He straightened and stepped into the room. His tunic was dark with sweat, but the stain spread along one side was darker still.

He glanced at the candles and looked around, his eyes coming to rest on me once again. "You been here alone?"

"Of course." I wondered uneasily if he'd noted some evidence to the contrary. "Are you hurt bad?"

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He swung down the aisle without a word. I followed after.

"You'd better get on to town and find a doctor," I advised, "before you bleed to death."

"It's stopped. Here everything stops." He glanced back at me dryly. "Or aint y'all noticed?"

The sight of the Bible brought him up short. He looked at me incredulously. "*You* been readin' Scripture?"

"Why not? It's a long night."

HE grinned ironically and sank into the chair before the Book. I dragged a spoolback up beside and facing him. "What are you going to do—just wait here until they come and get you?"

He stretched out in the chair, contemplating the candles overhead. "They aint comin'," he drawled, and yawned.

"This place stands out like a lighthouse!" I protested. "They could be here any minute!"

He favored me with a contemptuous glance. "For a book-bred smart-ass you don't ketch on too quick, do you? Don't you know where y'all are?"

After what I'd seen and heard tonight, I was afraid to guess. "All right, where are we?"

"Depot to Gehenna. You done bought your ticket and you seen the sun go down. From now on it's darkness for you, boy, eternal darkness."

I sighed. "Of course. 'Then wander forth the sons of Belial, flown with insolence and wine'."

He frowned. "You quotin' Scripture at me, boy?"

"No. 'Paradise Lost'. By a book-bred smart-ass named Milton."

He hawked and spat on the floor between us, spattering my feet. I leaped up and took refuge on the other side of the table.

"This aint no Paradise, ye lollpoop," he growled, "lost or found."

"Of course not. It doesn't even exist, remember?"

"It do for you, boy, it surely do," he sighed. "Back on the Ridge I thought I seen the light o' innocence in you." He reached out and clapped shut the Bible. "But it were jest corruption shinin' like rotten meat in moonlight!"

I smiled. "Maybe so, but I never murdered anyone." I pulled up a chair and sat down. "How many have you?" I asked sociably.

He leaned forward across the table, his arms on either side of the Bible, his fists clenched. "I never took no life outside o' lawful ord'nance and God's command!"

"Good for you. What about Randal Claney? And the preacher before you? And all the others?"

"They was weighed and found

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wantin'—they was tried and condemned!"

"By what court?"

"By the court o' Judgement!" His eyes, with their ghastly illusion of sightlessness, glared from sunken pits.

"And you appointed yourself executioner," I stated casually.

"I was chosen!" he shouted. "I was chosen!"

I had to be careful. The Appalachian native is actually no Anglo-Saxon, but a Celtic breed, and far more given to moral obsession. The hallelujah revivals that my father staged were as Welsh as he was. This speciman was all that and Indian, too. A highly explosive mixture, indeed.

"Chosen? How do you know?" I asked softly.

"Because God has spoken, and I believe. I aint no atheist like you!"

"Atheist?" I shook my head. "We all have our gods, Deacon, even those who say they have none."

"Who's yourn—Satan?"

"Why not?" I smiled. "Satan is merely God's other face."

He pondered me darkly. "That there's got a brimstone smell."

"The stink of hell, the fragrance of heaven—" I shrugged, "they're both made from the same musk."

"That brimstone smell's purely gettin' stronger."

"You're the expert."

"It don't take no expert to know the difference between good and evil, lies and truth!"

"Truth? What is truth?"

He grunted sardonically. "That question's been asked before."

"But never answered. It takes thinking. No, Deacon, you're better off with good old Manitou. Those Happy Hunting Grounds are still unsegregated."

His fist crashed upon the table. "I'm a white Christian, damn you!"

"You mean, like those white Christian forbears of yours—the ones who barely escaped being castrated and gutted by their white Christian brethren?" I pointed to the Indian scalps on the wall behind him. "Take a look. You may find a few ancestors there, too."

He gripped the table edge as though about to drive the table into me. I tensed, ready to spring away. But he finally sank back into his chair, and laid a hand on the darker brown of the bible's cover. "They brung the Word into the wilderness," he intoned huskily. "But they harkened unto unclean sperrits and learnt the Word no more. They learnt the abominations of the heathen instead, and knew their women." A new sonority rang in his voice. "They defiled the ark of their covenant with God, and His wrath poured from the belly of

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the mountain, and the streams were turned to blood and the land made waste! Therefore—therefore shall I turn my face from you, saith the Lord of Hosts, and your loins shall be withered and your women made barren!"

"You're lucky it wasn't permanent," I observed, but my humor escaped him.

HE was staring through me. "Cap'n Howlett and Chaplain Peters, they led us up the Ridge. We built us another town. In the third year the Shawnee come. They ringed the Ridge and burnt our crops. We were that sore-pressed, but we had the guns and they had none . . ." A Celtic lilt had begun to sweeten his drawling drone. "For over a sennight we held 'em off. But our victuals were low and the sickness come." He took a breath. "It looked like the pox . . . That night I stole from my post, creeping through the heathen lines, and got away by the Grace o' God. I crossed into the Carolinas and, after many a day, smelled the sea." His eyes glistened. "And there it was, the shinin' waters, and a ship anchored in the Sound, and the fields and houses of Fort Albemarle!"

Emotion slowly drained from his face. "They fetched me up afore Gov'nor Drummond, ragged as a shabberoon. And there was the Duke in his satin breeches and a velvet coat, and a heart as cold as a witch's kiss." His voice lifted in bitter mimicry: "'Gregory Brandon? The hangman? The bloody regicide? Is it sanctuary now you're wantin'? By'r Lady, it's sanctuary in hell you'll get!'"

For a long moment he stared into space, slowly subsiding. He started, turned sharply, gazing at the east wall, then leaped up and hurried to an embrasure.

I followed and peered into the darkness beside him. "What is it?"

"Drummond's troopers," he muttered. "Their Injun hookers picked up my trail." His nightmare had shifted in space and time, but I apparently was still part of it. "I thought I heard 'em."

"How did you escape?"

He glanced at me impatiently. "Dove overside afore the ship set sail. I'd liefer trust Shawnee kindness as a gallows-judge and a codshead jury!"

He suddenly stiffened, peering intently, then whirled and bounded up the aisle to the lacquer cabinet. He snatched open its doors—and stood stock-still, staring, stunned, at the empty shelves.

His head turned. Our eyes met. He started toward me, hand outstretched. "Give it to me," he demanded bleakly.

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I took a long, deep breath, and cocked the pistol as I drew it from inside my coat. "Here." I held it out.

When he was within five paces I fired.

He stopped abruptly, framed in smoke. His outstretched hand slowly sank as he looked down at the stain spreading over his chest . . . His face lifted. Blood oozed down a corner of his mouth and his eyes were stony slits of hate. He groped for the dagger at his belt . . .

The drugged incense could not now dilute my fright. He took a deliberate step toward me, holding the dagger low at his side. The pistol dropped from my nerveless fingers; I scuttled backwards, collided with the spoolback chair, grabbed and held it before me by its back, like an idiot playing lion-tamer . . . He bared his teeth in a bloody grin, advancing still another step—he suddenly charged!

I hurled the chair with all my might! It must have struck an eye, for he stumbled, clapping a hand to his face. I dashed wildly past him up the aisle. As I reached the archway I heard his footsteps in pursuit behind me. My momentum carried me across the anteroom and crashed me into the back wall. I bounded off, kicked the ancient powder-keg, snatched it up, and slung it behind me at his legs!

He tripped. The building shook as he hit the floor, his head beneath the archway peak.

The next instant he had no head.

It lay on its cheek, open-eyed, divided by the broadaxe blade from the raw, red stump of the severed neck. Five rhythmic spurts of blood arched across the floor. Then stopped.

I staggered backwards against the granite wall, turned and plunged toward the narrow stairwell, stepping on some musket-balls. My feet flew out from under me and I pitched, head-first, into oblivion . . .

I LAY on my side, knees updrawn, arms crossed on my chest, shivering like a fetus in a caul of ice. Thick-tongued with thirst, I opened my eyes at the distant drumming of a waterfall. A coral conflagration lit the sky and edged the scalloped rim of the surrounding hills with pastel pinks. But the wasteland about me was still filled with the shadows of left-over night. And amidst them, a short distance away, a saddled mule stood stolidly.

A pulse in my ankle beat hot counterpoint to one in my skull, and my body ached in every joint. I stirred, unable to repress a groan, and looked up—into Brandon's face.

I straightened in startled hor-

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ror, and was blinded by a shock of pain as my ankle banged against a rock. My cry was a mere gasping croak.

He knelt and put a canteen to my lips. I clutched it, gulping, eye fixed on him, my brain a bedlam. Presently he tore it from my grasp. "That'll do for now."

He arose, observing me critically. "Looks like you're dried out wuss'n Claney was. But, of course," he added thoughtfully, "you been gone three days longer."

"Three—Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Jest whut I said. He was gone two days. You been gone five. I come here eve'y day lookin' for y'all," he smouldered accusingly. "I sure as hell don't want no chicken-haid she'iff comin' 'round askin' damn-fool questions—and your car settin' out there in my front yard!"

I jammed the heel of my hand into my forehead, but I could not crush out the ache or confusion. I hurt too much for this to be a dream! I was awake! This was real!

But so was Whitehall! I'd hurt my ankle falling down those stairs!

Yet Brandon stood there beside his mule, quite alive, stuffing his canteen into a saddle-bag . . . He'd been killed! Decapitated! I saw it with my own eyes!

The distant falls sparkled pink in the brightening dawn. I remembered how I'd walked from there directly to this spot. No mistake about that! I looked around me quickly, anxiously, for the fortress walls of petrified logs, the sentry towers, the gate ajar . . .

But all I saw was an unbroken sea of red sand and white stones that filled the bottom of the valley . . .

As the Deacon approached, I arose on one elbow, my hand brushing my jaw. Startled, I felt its quarter-inch stubble. "What—what happened?" I croaked.

"You seen Whitehall," he snapped. "Let's go."

I tried to push up to a sitting position, but fell back as I snatched up my hand at a stab of pain, my palm punctured.

"Suck it," the Deacon growled. "This ground's p'ison."

I did so and, with my other hand, dug out a large, jagged shard of white porcelain, and held it up to the morning light.

Beneath its gleaming glaze a pop-eyed Belshazzar glared balefully at a Moving Finger.

The Deacon took it from my hand, glanced at it, and flung it aside. "Lots of junk like that lyin' around."

He scooped me up in his arms as if I were a child, and carried me to his waiting mule.

I've been sitting on Brandon's porch scribbling this report

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ever since he brought me here and left, promising to send Vashti to 'witch' my ankle well—if he could find her. That was ten hours ago. I've seen neither of them since. But I don't need her. I tested my ankle in warming up the engine of my car. The swelling's down, the pain's almost all gone. I'm getting out of here while it's still light. Don't expect me for a week.

I'll mail this at Turkey Run and pick up something to eat. I'm starved. All I've had since I've been here is some cold sowbelly I found on the stove. I fed most of it to the Deacon's dog.

She came trotting in a couple of hours ago, a friendly young hound, black as coal. She's lying at my feet right now, watching me steadily. It's a bit disconcerting to look up into those dark, gold-flecked eyes. They're so . . . oddly familiar . . .

AUTHOR'S NOTE—The following clipping from the Sevier County (Tenn.) weekly, "The Volunteer", was attached by Dr. Calder to the above report:

Turkey Run—The motorist killed leaving town last Friday has been identified as Lucian Gwynn, 32, an art dealer from Washington, D.C. His speeding car sheared off two telephone poles when he tried to avoid hitting a dog in the road. Glass from the shattered windshield decapitated the body.

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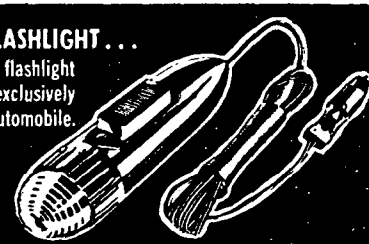

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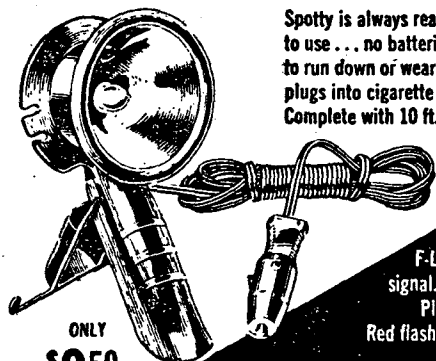

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The Man Who

His name was Jake Kroehler; he was two months less than thirty years old and he was studying algebra when he was first taken.

THE transition to full awareness again was gradual, reversing the blurring and fuzziness. It was not the shadowed, desk-lamp lit hole where he worked, but a large, airy, unfamiliar room. A room of glowing colors and angle-less corners, of ceiling and wall fusion that was not really a continuous curve. . . . He wanted to look closer, but his eyes refused the command and perversely closed, blotting out the strange room. With vision gone he was overwhelmed by a confusion of foreign memories and sensations; when he reached up to rub his eyes, nothing happened. He tried to look down at himself, at his hand, as if questioning its failure to obey, but again it was merely a thought and not an action. Abruptly he became aware that other thoughts were being directed at him.

There were no words, but he understood he was to relax and not be frightened. He felt hysteria rising when the realization came that there were two sets of thoughts sending out impulses, one his, and one not his. His fight was brief although intense as he tried to rid his mind of the other's presence, but the other was stronger, and he felt his will collapsing under the commanding influence of it. Almost meekly he heeded, as if knowing his sanity depended on not continuing the struggle any longer. It was peaceful as he let go and let the strange other-thoughts take over.

They needed him. Who were they? It was not given. They wouldn't harm him. They would

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Painted Tomorrow

By KATE WILHELM

get him again. Get? How? They would wait until he was alone, late at night, when it wouldn't inconvenience him, or alarm anyone else.

It was concluded quickly and he was back at his desk, both hands grasping the hardness of the surface, pushing his body upright. Dazedly he looked about, searching for the other being, or some proof. There was none.

Jake lit a cigarette unsteadily and flicked off the light. He made coffee and while he waited for it he went to the bathroom and examined himself under the cruel fluorescent light. His face was thin, angular, with each bone prominent under tight skin. Sandy hair and eye brows, warm brown eyes, and a predilection to freckle combined to give him a perennial youthful look. Although he looked tired, he was not so tired that he should hallucinate. He watched his hand shake as he held it out, but he knew it had been steady before the 'dream'. With the coffee he regained his customary composure and decided that without further evidence he would have to put aside the curious happening unclassified. He drank the coffee and went to bed.

THE next night he had dinner with Stella. "Honey, it's no use. It's been six weeks now and getting worse all the time." He decided he'd better not mention the dream, or she might insist he be analyzed.

"Jake, stop it. You're doing fine. No one expects you to knock them out at school. Just stick with it."

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"But I keep tangling with the teachers. Some of them are younger than I am! I'll flunk out and all this time will have been wasted."

"Jake Kroehler, do you want your old job back?"

"Do you still want to marry me?" she asked more softly.

"Cut it out, Stell. You know I do. But I just don't like going to school. I was doing vital work, doing it well, and now I can't even be admitted inside the plant! We're next door to war and I'm learning how to draw. I'm too old for it. I don't like being with a bunch of kids."

"That's the whole point," the girl said earnestly. "All the kids are getting six to eight years of college and you haven't had any. Rocket Research doesn't want to lose you, and you know it. It must have been a terrific shock to them to find you doing Point Twelve work with no advance education at all. And you can't expect them to continue to allow you to wander about as if you still had your security badge pinned on. But they do want you or they would not have insisted on this schooling at their expense. It's nothing more than a formality."

"For the next three years?" he exclaimed. At the look on her face he hastily added, "Okay, babe, okay. We'll see."

Glumly he remembered the day Craig Hennessey had called him to the upstairs office. Hennessey was the personnel director at Rocket Research, and was inclined to take himself and the job more seriously than his predecessor had. "Kroehler, we don't have a 1209A on you. Fill this out," he'd said peremptorily.

Jake took the sheaf of papers slowly. Before his retirement old man Winston had warned him it would happen one day. "You're a natural born designer, Jake," he had grumbled when Jake first applied at R.R. "Once you visualize it, you've got it down to how many threads on every screw. God knows that's a gift. "Course, that isn't enough. No letters after your name." He sighed and then snapped the folder shut, closing his eyes at the same time and said, "Well, report to Dr. Speier for a two week tryout. Don't just stand there."

Dr. Speier never had any complaint in the course of the next seven years, and he never asked where Jake had studied. Then Craig Hennessey replaced Winston. When Jake returned Form 1209A there was a series of minor, unauthorized explosions at R.R.: first Hennessey's, then Speier's when Hennessey marched on his office armed with the folder, and again when Speier challenged the Board meeting at the first of the month to protest the automatic dismissal of

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Jake Kroehler. After a stormy hour session the wording of the dismissal was changed to read, Leave of absence, and Jake was ordered to school with a small salary and all expenses paid.

HE continued to attend school, in the national interest. Like it he could not. Always a vociferous reader, he had long ago mastered and surpassed the basic courses he was now studying, and in one or two of the fields of study, he had the nagging suspicion that he could instruct the teacher. Formalizing his information, categorizing it and labeling it ready for withdrawal proved boring to him, since his mental filing system had been devised for his personal accommodation, cross filed in a way that permitted him to use bits of algebra intermixed with geometry and trig, and even finger counting, if that proved expedient. So it was with the other bits and pieces, and whole books that he had consumed during the years passed. The answers he seemed able to provide when questioned were not always, or even often, the ones set forth in the texts and lectures.

Although *they* had not interrupted his late studying again, he still kept the incident in the 'unfinished' section of his mental file case. And he waited. He stretched at his desk and his eyes fell on his painting, brought home that day. He grinned at the memory of the scene that went with the painting.

"Mr. Kroehler—." The art instructor had looked like a man with a pain as he stared at Jake's most recent effort. "An artist puts something of himself into his work. It is the difference between a poet and a reporter. There is an emotion or a mood to be transmitted, not merely figures to be depicted."

Jake frowned at his picture and asked, "Don't they look like cows?"

"That's the whole point, Mr. Kroehler. They look precisely like cows. But the very title of this course is *Self Expression* Through Art. Isn't there also a mood, perhaps of serenity, that you wished to convey?"

"A mood? No. I just wanted to paint the cows."

Professor Shenkel started to speak, hesitated, and then without glancing again at the scene, said, "You have done so, Mr. Kroehler. You have painted cows."

Jake's grin faded as he let his gaze drop from the painting to the algebra text. It was almost one-thirty when he finished his homework. The blurring, when it came, was without warning and ended almost instantly. He was again in the other room. Again the other eyes closed before he

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could get a good look about him, and he was flooded with the thoughts of the other being.

"Who are you?"

"Think of me as Zlen. You are not afraid this time."

"I've been waiting. . . ."

There were no word symbols, no sentences, simply controlled patterns of thought, and Jake knew why he was being taken. It wasn't unpleasant, only strange. Later he separated the many impressions, emotions, sensations, and gave them the formality of language.

He, his mind, would be brought to that place many times so that the other civilization could put together a facsimile of his era. There was a museum, and through flashes of rigidly held pictures in the other one's mind he made a tour of several mammoth rooms. He saw resurrected the time of the cave man, the surging multitudes of Egypt, and the dark and gloomy half-life of the middle ages. Each room represented a separate era that had been recreated on murals depicting every major aspect of life of that time. There were also artifacts, and machinery—from the crude, vine rope drawn sleds of the stone workers of the pre-wheel days to the model of Fulton's steam engine. Even a scaled down version of a cyclotron. His mind had gone whirling off on a tangent to be brought back sharply when he realized what he was seeing. He couldn't manage the control of Zlen and many times he felt himself being pushed almost all the way out until he concentrated and stemmed the confusion of his own thoughts.

"But you already had someone from my days. That cyclotron."

"He couldn't do what you can do. For the murals, we need you."

"I'm not an artist."

"We don't need an artist. They interpret. We searched hard and long for someone who can paint things as they are."

THE session was longer this time. Jake was shown a large room with blank walls, and while he was looking at it, a door slid open in the far end and a robot wheeled into the room. The mind holding Jake's, as a parent holds a child by the hand, was firm and gentle, but it held his mind there. The robot stopped in the center of the room, and began to dismantle itself. They, Jake and Zlen, watched as it worked soundlessly, extracting what turned out to be a flat surface, a tray, and began to prepare a palette. It worked extremely fast. It should have worked fast. It had four arms.

"Why?" Jake asked. "Why four hands?"

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Slowly Zlen's eyes turned to himself, for the first time, and it was as if Jake were examining himself, starting with the floor: soft blue slippers, feather weight, comfortable leggings that were a richer blue, almost velvety, a deep red doublet affair that was sleeveless. . . . Very slowly Zlen's eyes passed over the hands, four of them. Jake recoiled.

He was not allowed to escape. Zlen's people had four arms and four five digited hands. For the first time since the initial capture, Jake considered that Zlen was actually alien, not only in his mind processes, but in his antecedents, in his entire orientation. Zlen was very gentle with him, not rebuking him for the attempted withdrawal, not trying to force acceptance. "Rest," he seemed to be saying. "The next time you will learn to control the robot."

Jake was returned to his room, and when he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the picture of the cows. He laughed and fell asleep laughing, still sitting at his desk. When he awakened it seemed unimportant that Zlen was alien. The Christmas holiday arrived and on the first day of no school he slept for twenty-four hours, straight through, breaking a date with Stella. The next day when he called for her, rested for the first time in seven weeks, he was startled at her appearance. Stella looked tired, and worry lines were apparent on her forehead more often than not.

"It's nothing," she said shrugging off his questions. "Overtime four nights last week. I called you, but you didn't answer. . . ." It ended slightly in the air, as if to be punctuated with a question mark only if he interpreted it as a question. He ignored it.

"Overtime? What's up?"

"Haven't you even been reading the papers recently? There's been no communication from the moon base for four days now, and we are accusing the Russians of moon grabbing. They've orbited seven new satellites in the past ten days, stationary types, and they refuse to say why, or what they are carrying. . . . You mean that you haven't been following any of this?" There was a note of incredulity in her voice.

"I've been working on term papers," he said, knowing it sounded as lame and false as it was.

"Jake, are you . . . ? I mean, you are staying in doing homework on the nights we don't see each other?"

Jake blinked as he hesitated a second. He tried to tell her, as he had several times already, and the words froze in his throat, blocked, he was certain by Zlen. When he answered, he knew she didn't believe him. "Sure I am."

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"Oh," she said, and her eyes slid past him. She remained just beyond arm's length the rest of the evening, and asked to be taken home early.

THAT evening they got him at nine-thirty.

"Dammit, I'm quitting! Stell's suspicious, and my school work's taking a beating, and what am I getting out of it? Circles under my eyes. Went to sleep in history last week, slept through a date with Stell, haven't even started a term paper and there'll be five of them due in less than a month. We'll probably be at war in a couple of weeks and here I am painting pictures and losing everything that means anything to me. Put me back!"

He continued to direct the robot that wielded four brushes as he fumed at Zlen. He had come amazingly far in the five weeks since his first painting session. Now he could control the robot and continue a thought-conversation at the same time. Zlen was seated before a control panel, his four hands encased in it, and the close fitting helmet that was not quite uncomfortably tight circled his head, but it was his, Jake's, mind that sent the neural impulses that were amplified by the machine and retransmitted to the tuned in robot. The two brains were fused into a single unit with a common purpose: to paint the mural. Mostly Zlen's eyes were on the robot and the work in progress; Jake never saw his face. To his inquiry about it Zlen had answered, "Much like your own actually. No real difference except in degree." If, however, Jake was learning little about the other being, he was learning much about himself: how to concentrate on the mural and have enough mind left over for the never acknowledged game of hide and seek he played with Zlen. And he was learning how to screen certain areas of his own. Like the knowledge that he sometimes got a glimpse of what lay beyond the room and the muraled walls. There was a curious door that was never long out of Zlen's mind . . .

Zlen kept secrets. For one thing Jake hadn't yet seen another living being. He saw the room through Zlen's eyes, a room that was curved where walls met ceiling, that was glowing in ever changing colors, that housed low flowing benches that seemed to be relaxed and waiting until his host sat or reclined, and then assumed a contour that Jake's mind registered in harmony with the other mind as comfortable. To a very small extent, when he tried persistently, he could make the eyes rest on a particular piece of furniture long enough for Jake to get the picture of it set. He was amassing a lot of

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such pictures in his notebook. But whole areas were off limits to him. Where were they? Mars? Another star? What sort of cities lay outside? Transportation? Government? Power supply? And why wouldn't they let him see more?

"It takes too much of your mind off your work if we talk."

"For ten minutes each time we could converse."

"There isn't enough time."

"Why such a hurry?"

"The robot is waiting."

He thought blue sky at the robot, and redirected his attention to the other mind. "This is the last time I'll come," he warned and thought if a mind could laugh, it must feel exactly like what he experienced then.

THE next day he spent hours in the art museum pouring over modern art; surrealism, cubism, futurism. Then he called Stell at her office, but the automatic switchboard had been set to inform him she was in conference, so he spent the afternoon blocking in his painting for his art class equivalent of a term paper. Almost viciously he copied from the many sketches he had made of The Room and of the robot manipulating four varicolored brush ends along the long wall. They wanted self expression—let them sweat over it.

That night he sat and waited for the summons impatiently. The robot obeyed his unspoken orders, and an eye was centered in a low hanging cloud. Next to it rose a scarlet plume of smoke ending in an over-ripe-looking breast. Buildings took on the look of a child's box-in-a-box toy . . .

"What are you doing? What's that?"

He ignored the almost audible shriek of thoughts and kept the robot at it as the other mind became fully alert. He slipped in behind its defenses and was staggered by the immensity of the landscape he caught.

There were wide, colorful streets that glowed in pastels, and above them hung buildings that were gently shaped, rounded almost at the edges. The four-armed robots mingled with the people who seemed never to touch the ground, but to float effortlessly above it. Trees and shrubs and blooming plants were in profusion and everywhere he looked all that he saw was clean and sparkling. He saw it all through Zlen's eyes and memories and enjoyed it with Zlen's emotions; it was good. There were other impressions: memories of the one who waited daily for Zlen's return; a glimpse of laboratories and school rooms; of a huge space ship agleam in space, illumined by a distant sun that was not Jake's sun. A look at a magnificent door.

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Almost immediately Zlen's shield was slammed down again, but not before he got a good look at the curious door that had intrigued him from the first.

"Stop it! Take all that out!"

Zlen took control of the robot and obediently he withdrew as it halted, one of the brushes midway in a vermillion stroke against a chartreuse sky.

"What's wrong?" he queried, spitefully aware that Zlen was already probing.

"What are you doing? You know what we want. What is that stuff?"

"Surrealism, I think. We're learning about it in art class. Pretty, isn't it?" He sent a thought at the waiting robot and it finished the stroke, a vivid, searing gash across the screaming green.

"Take it off!"

"You take it off," he flashed back and concentrated on his proposed refutation of John Stuart Mill's Canons of Induction. "'If two or more instances of the phenomenon under investigation have only one circumstance in common, the circumstance in which alone all the instances agree, is the cause (or effect) of the given phenomenon.' But, Mr. Mill, surely you must have overlooked, the fact that no one could possibly take into account all the circumstances that could possibly effect.."

HE was again in his room. He smiled and put on coffee, hoping he'd have time enough to drink some before they came again. He was standing up when Zlen returned.

"Hey!" he yelped. "I might hurt myself if you yank me without warning."

Zlen was seated before the control panel, one pair of hands holding the helmet, the other pair already out of sight in the panel. Jake realized that either they couldn't, or were not willing, to force him to cooperate. They were willing to negotiate. His acceptance of the terms registered in both minds simultaneously almost with their presentation. "You continue to help us willingly, and we'll help you with your studies."

He went back to the robot and directed the removal of all the night's work. After he had it going again he returned his attention to Zlen.

"How will you help me?"

"We can prepare you for examinations."

"And?"

"We feel that is enough. You have already benefited in learning to concentrate." Jake thought cubism, and he added, "Very well. Your term papers will be in your mind ready for dictation."

Jake apologized mentally and promised to behave. It was ex-

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hausting work, painting through the robot and exchanging ideas with Zlen. As long as the restricted areas were avoided, there was a complete give and take of information. Every time he returned from the room, he had knowledge of the sort that let him know apples grew on trees. It was axiomatic knowledge that he didn't question. There was a new and different philosophy that no longer asked if there be substance or time, but knew with certainty that there were merely discrete events, intervals, that space was a discontinuous variant of time. He knew minds could bypass both. He knew the stars were accessible, that man would scatter his seed so far that he would endure forever.

He didn't know why the door had such importance to Zlen. He didn't know why there had been no earth-type humans in the vast panoramic city he had glimpsed, only alien forms wity four arms that glided along above the ground surface. He didn't know why they couldn't merely visit the eras they desired to reconstruct and do their own art work, their own machinery building. He knew they had inter-stellar travel, commerce, that the universe was peaceful.

He was withdrawing from the robot when a little part of his mind went through the museum on a flashing trip with his host's. He kept his attention, the main part, on the mural and intermixed all stray thoughts with a continuation of Mill's statements concerning induction.

He directed the robot; he thought of Mill; he went through the museum with Zlen. There were other rooms that he had seen already, and systematically Zlen glanced inside them. But next to the room where they worked, he paused a bit longer, saddened, a little afraid. Jake withdrew further so that Zlen wouldn't feel his presence, but it was no good; the introspective survey was almost as casual as the other glances had been.

Then Zlen was back questioning his slowness and the curtain was down tight again. Together they studied the mural, now almost half completed. There was a waterfront scene with tugboats and ocean steamers, fishing boats and runabouts. From there it went on to a city skyline, undeniably New York's, and then telescoped down to include individual buildings. It flowed along the elevated and subway to the Holland Tunnel and over the myriad crisscrossed at many levels. There was a subdivision and an industrial park in the process of turnpikes and thruways that completion. It was as complete and definitive as if a series of photographs had been taken, en-

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larged, and fixed together on the wall.

"Why don't some of your people just go to the places they want to copy and take photographs?" Jake asked.

"It would not be feasible."

WELL, he had tried, he thought later, back in his apartment. The transition now was simply a second of mental blackout with an immediate and complete return to awareness. What exactly had Zlen meant by, 'It would not be feasible'? Why was the next room devoted again to cavemen? And what was it about the mural he had seen in that adjoining room that had been so *wrong?* He shut his eyes and brought back the mural. The cave sat high up on a cliff, the day's kill stretched out with women bent over it using sharpened stones . . . Stones? He thought they had reflected light. Could they have been metal? But there was something else . . . Then he had it. It had been full of symbolism! But they wanted realism, not symbolic stuff, and definitely not interpretations. They wouldn't have allowed the mind they used to add to, or detract from, the scenes impressed in his brain. He wished he could recall why he thought it had been symbolic. Somehow it was important, but Zlen hadn't been looking really, not looking *at* anything, just letting his inner eye roam, and the image was as fuzzy as a distant scene seen from a speeding car.

Jake sat at his desk without moving, as the implication struck him. Why had he assumed they were from another world at all? It made less sense for an intelligent race merely to watch and wait for Earthmen to make the perilous climb from caveman to the present, than for future Earthmen to recreate the eras of their own development. The museum represented each significant period, arranged consecutively: cavemen to agrarian culture; Egypt through Rome; the dark ages and the rediscovery of science. And now his own time.

Why back to cavemen in the next room? He was afraid of the persistent answer that formed itself, and he pushed the question aside and concentrated on the caveman scene again. How had they got that carcass up to the cave? There had been a lift! He brought back to focus as much of the scene as he could. There had been a platform affair with ropes, or more likely, braided animal skins, and there had been a pulley . . . He fell asleep.

The next day he worked again on his art and began sketching in the door he had seen time after time in Zlen's mind. He couldn't get it and finally gave up in disgust. He attacked his

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algebra, and to his surprise found that the methods advocated in the book were at least as valid as his own. He breathed a thank-you to Zlen. He found that he could force his mind not to wander to the newscast, not to want to read the daily papers, but a brief headline that he had glimpsed on the newsstand persisted as an after-image, and repeatedly he read: Thrust and counter thrust turn moon into battlefield.

That night the mural progressed smoothly and the mental sparring was kept to a minimum until he let loose the demand, "What is that door?"

There it was, complete and clear, and he knew he had the picture of it. Immediately it was gone again and there was a mind, whole and unshielded, a mind terrifying in its naked, compassionate upheaval. It saw destruction approaching swiftly and mixed with pity and the futility of hoping where there was no hope for a means of averting that destruction, were worries about the mural and its completion. There was great love for the mind that shares itself, and Jake didn't know if it were his love or Zlen's, and then knew it was both and stronger than either. Suddenly there were thoughts that were new and strange, angry—or regretful—but insistent.

". . . impossible to work knowing . . ."

". . . start over. Precious time gone . . ."

". . . bits of information, not real knowledge . . ."

". . . try it with Lor . . ."

There was nothing, no awareness of a loss, or of non-being, nothing. He was back in a mind then. Tentatively he probed and knew it was a new mind, one that had no random thoughts, but was a concentration machine intent on only one thing, to complete the mural. When Jake was returned to his room, he awakened mumbling from exhaustion.

DARLING, what happened to you? The doctor's coming. Please don't try to get up."

"I got the door . . . They are scared . . . They like us, but . . . Huh, Stell!" He saw the cloud of gleaming red hair and shook his head hard coming thoroughly awake. "A doctor?"

"Oh, Jake, I'm sorry. All this time I thought . . . Darling, forgive me. I was so frightened when I came in and saw you. You wouldn't wake up and I thought you were dead." She pressed him back against the chair and held him tightly, her head against his chest.

An hour later when the doctor rang the bell, they both pretended they didn't hear it. Then Stell murmured, "Darling, you are an

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artist! That painting in your room is shattering. No wonder you are so exhausted."

Jake grinned in the darkness and didn't mention that it was not a surrealistic creation as she seemed to think, but rather one of his very ordinary reproductions of things as they were. He felt composed about the other room, now that he knew he could copy the door and take it from there.

* * *

The school semester ended and he made very high grades on all his finals, surprising his teachers almost as much as Stell. The mural was three quarters completed, now including rocket launching pads and orbiting satellites, space stations and moon rockets. Jake had come to some conclusions about his captors. They were from the future and couldn't transport matter either forward or backward in time. But they could reach out to capture minds. Apparently they had traced their civilization back to its beginning and something—the pulley and lifts perhaps—had sent them back further to another beginning. Slowly, painfully they had traced it upward again, and now it appeared that it might be a race against time itself whether or not he would be the one to complete the mural. He experienced again the horror of the earthwide holocaust Zlen's mind had exposed. He decided to work a little harder and faster.

He was working on his drawing of the door and still getting nowhere with it. He knew it was important, but he couldn't think of why it had caused as much turmoil as it had.

That night as he directed the robot he tried ever so gently to loosen his new co-worker, but with the same results as before. He concentrated harder on the robot until all four brushes were fairly flying, and his partner too had to concentrate harder. Apparently he was too busy following the blur of motion to notice the stray thought of Jake's.

"Zlen, can you hear me?"

"No! No!"

"How long is the time gap before Man starts again after the war?" The time of asking was also the time of answering and he knew: twelve to fifteen thousand years.

HE returned as tired as ever, but instead of the usual coffee and sandwich before bed, he went to Stell's apartment.

"Jake, are you out of your mind! It's two in the morning!" Stell's eyes lost their frightened look and began to gleam ominously.

Jake stood holding the door knob and asked, "Honey, do you dye your hair?"

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"Dye my . . . ? Jake Kroehler you're mad!"

"Humor me, babe. Do you?"

"Of course not! Do you mind telling me what this is all about?" She pulled her robe about her tightly.

"Nothing, beautiful. It's the most gorgeous hair I've ever seen." He kissed the end of her nose. "Want to come over and fix breakfast at my place in the morning? I'll be up working all night, and I'll be hungry." He left her staring at the door as he closed it behind him.

When Stell arrived at seven-thirty he was smudged with paint, unshaved and hollow eyed, but he was grinning happily. "I think I'm ready, babe," he announced exultantly and swung her high off the floor.

"You idiot! What is the matter with you?"

"Look, my pet. What does that look like to you?"

He opened the door to his study with a flourish. Across from it stood a reproduction of The Door. It stood ten feet tall and seven feet wide, extending from the ceiling to the floor. The wall on both sides was painted a dull black against which The Door stood out in bold, glowing gold, gleaming bright and shadowed from an unseen source of light that seemed to emanate from the door itself. The handle was a bar set in the middle of it, two thirds of the way up. Behind it The Door was recessed slightly and the handle protruded a bit, lighted from the rear. There was no ornamentation, no carving or scrollwork either on The Door or on the framework that supported it. Just a Door and a threshold. It looked solid and real and massive. It looked as if it would open.

Stell made a small moaning sound and stepped toward it, her hand out.

"Not yet, babe. I have to finish something else first," Jake said quietly and caught her by the arm, taking her from the room. It had affected her the same way —an irresistible urge to go through!

"Jake, what is it? It's beautiful. It's real!"

"I painted it," he said, suddenly tired. He felt his chin and knew he should shave, but he said instead, "Come on, let's go out and get something to eat."

They ate silently, Stell's face withdrawn and thoughtful, and awed whenever she looked directly at him. Over the second cup of coffee he reached across the table and took her hand. "Stell, I want to be married right away. I'm through with school. I want you to be with me all the time."

She attempted a laugh and said shakily, "It will take a month even if we start things today."

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"We'll start today," he said firmly. He paid the tab and they went to the street. Jake turned her to face him and said softly, "Stell, put an 'urgent' on any calls from me and take them no matter where you are, will you?" She nodded and he added, "And, honey, if I call and tell you to come, drop everything and get to my place!"

THE mural would take twelve to fourteen sessions more, he informed his new partner that night. The robot stood waiting, small mixers poised over the bare paint tray, its brushes dry and clean. They both ignored it and the lifelike mural behind it. Jake added the thought that he could manage two sessions a day until completion. There was a moment of confusion in the other mind and Jake felt his own mind being probed gently. He didn't try to conceal anything and there was a wave of quick unrepressed sympathy.

"I am sorry, my friend. There is nothing we can do."

"And nothing I can do?"

"Nothing. The seeds of war were sown many years ago and they flourished and grew. It is now inevitable. We could tell your people it is so, but this they had known from the beginning."

Jake looked deeply into the other and knew it was true. They had searched frantically for this era, and, finally finding it, learned by looking forward that it was doomed. "We see only through the minds of those we are able to bring to us," his host explained. "The machinery is complicated and erratic as yet. We are learning, but it is so slow. Control is haphazard. To find an era and bring from it a mind that is capable of teaching us consumes many years, and many false tries."

They had plucked a mind from the sixteenth century and from there worked both backward and forward, back to the earliest traces of man in his cave, and forward to Jake's civilization, and then had drawn a blank. For twelve to fifteen thousand years there was no trace of man to be found.

"Can you tell me about the Door now?"

"Nothing. We do not understand it ourselves yet. The science that constructed it is as much advanced over ours, as we are over yours. It opens, and three who went through it did not return. Nor did they emerge from the other side. We discovered it in the ruins of Tau Ceti IV. Our scientists are investigating. And our theologians. The Door seems to stir up deeply buried memories, race memories, in all our people who see it."

Jake thought of The Door he had painted and the other mind

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was suddenly alive with questions, probing urgently in his mind, and then withdrawing a bit as he realized that Jake *knew* only what he had grasped from Zlen, and the rest was surmise. Together they studied the reproduction of The Door Jake had painted on his wall. It was exact, they both agreed.

It's here now, Jake thought, the face of it, the part we see. The other side is someplace else always. If it's right, it is connected, however invisibly, to the other one, the original one. If there were two, they'd be bound together; if there were a hundred, they'd be as one. Plato would describe the original door as the Ideal, one that reached out throughout space and time and bound to itself all doors. The door was forbidden, taboo, a mystery to its finders who feared it and were drawn to and through it. It was as magical to them as their ability to free a mind and move it through time was to Jake, and as his ability to build and broadcast voices through a radio would have been to a fourteenth century alchemist.

It didn't all come as a steady flow of coherent thoughts: there were interruptions from the other mind, questions, disclaimers . . . Then the other one seized control and asked, "Why are you so certain The Door is a passage through time? How can you know?"

"Because you are here," Jake answered simply. "Because the next room in the museum contains the mural it does. Because the pulley is in it."

HE finished the mural only days before the first bombs fell. He was blocks from his apartment when the sirens wailed and the air was alive with pulsating voices warning of attack with fifteen minutes. He turned and ran. Stell would be coming. She must be coming! Why hadn't he thought of how it would be. No calls were being allowed. He ran and now there was shrieking and hysteria, and in the street abandoned cars stood at crazy angles defying the siren bearing official cars.

He half heard the cry, nearly a block from his building, and he turned and caught Stell by the arm and they ran on together. "This way. This way," an officious voice called and motioned them toward the basement entrance of the building. Jake ran past him, dragging Stell. She pulled toward the elevators, but he ignored them and pounded up the stairs. The electricity might be off any second . . . He pulled her up the four flights.

"Jake!" she cried breathlessly. "We have to get to shelter!"

(*continued on page 117*)

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FANTASY BOOKS

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Almuric, *by Robert E. Howard 157 pages. Ace Books, 40¢.*

Technically, at least, this is a science fiction novel, since it deals with an interplanetary voyage and an alien world. But once the first paragraph is past and the hero has been teleported to distant Almuric, all s-f trappings are forgotten and the reader enters Howard's familiar world of sword-swinging and witchery.

Howard, of course, is best noted for his long series of stories chronicling the adventures of a barbarian named Conan in Earth's dim but not quite prehistoric past. Almuric, which Howard left in a completed but unrevised state when he took his life in 1936, lies outside the Conan framework, since it takes place in another solar system, and for that reason it forfeits much of the power of Howard's better-known books. One of the joys of reading Conan is that of entering into a world furnished with history, geography, technology, mythology—a richly—textured place, whose kingdoms and demons swiftly become familiar to the reader. Conan's wild exploits are acted out against this lustrous background, which is drawn in part from archaeological and historical truth. The internal inconsistencies of the Conan-world only add to the fun, giving the reader a chance to test his own knowledge against Howard's.

Here is all the swordplay and sorcery, just as exciting as in any of the Conan books—but that extra dimension is missing, because Howard is all too obviously making up his background as he goes along. The book is fun to read, easy to forget, a minor work in the Howard canon. It first appeared, incidentally, as a serial in *Weird Tales* in 1939. At that time, the magazine explained that Howard had completed his rough draft and had "nearly completed a revision." Perhaps, if he had lived, he might have provided the close-textured background of his other books. At any rate, it's good to see Howard in print once more. When will someone reprint the Conan series, now?

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The Reign of Wizardry, *by Jack Williamson. Lancer Books, 50¢. 142 pages.*

That marvelous treasure-house of novel-length fantasy, *Unknown,* is still yielding pure gold. Here—for the first time, I think, since its magazine appearance in 1940—is a dandy Jack Williamson adventure set in Minoan Crete, retelling the story of Theseus and the Minotaur with fine gusto and a shrewd eye for detail.

What Williamson has done is to make use of modern archaeological knowledge of ancient Crete, chiefly the findings of Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, to provide a convincing background for his tale. Then he has employed the traditional figures of the myth—Theseus, Ariadne, Minos, and the rest—filling out his cast of characters with some of his own invention, most notably Snish, the popeyed Babylonian wizard. And the story itself, though it follows the lines of the myth, is a gorgeous romp in something of the Robert E. Howard manner, with a fair dollop of the logical wackiness for which *Unknown* was justly celebrated.

The results are perhaps not so literarily accomplished as the two recent Renault novels about Theseus, *The King Must Die* and *The Bull From the Sea.* But the story is a lovely job all the same, with nary a dull moment. The purist in me objects to finding Etruscans contemporary with Minoan Crete, but I have no other quarrel with the book.

The Day the World Ended, *by Sax Rohmer. Ace Books, 40¢. 223 pages.*

I think I was simply born too late to appreciate certain famous bad writers of the previous generation. My lack of affection for the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs has already been amply declared in AMAZING STORIES, and I must report now that I find Sax Rohmer just as silly a writer in an entirely different way.

Rohmer was reasonably literate, at least. And I suppose his Fu Manchu stories had a certain romantic sheen in their day. But I've never been able to suspend disbelief enough to swallow a Rohmer story, or even to get interested in it. This one—very handsomely presented by Ace, incidentally—is unrelated to the Fu Manchu series, except stylistically. There is the same air of furtive mystery, of Dread Things taking place behind yon arras and beneath that manhole, and there is a certain amount of dated pseudo-sophistication, and there is a great deal of talk about the ominousness of it all.

The lead character here is that darling of this obsolete school of fiction, the free-lance reporter. He's one Brian Woodville here,

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who narrates the book and gets it off to a brisk start with a mysterious voice warning him to get out of Baden-Baden. Following which comes an endless amount of talk, a good deal of skulking around in bat-infested German castles, and various malign deeds perpetrated by a mad scientist calling himself Anubis. The writing itself is unutterably chuckleheaded, as I think this sample passage from page 136 will amply demonstrate:

"I experienced a degree of bewilderment to which I had never sunk before.

"'Lonergan!' I whispered. . . . 'Lonergan!'"

"'Himself!'"

"It was the well-known voice! Not the voice of the Rev. Josiah Higgins, but the voice which I had first associated with Aldous P. Kluster. And yet, in some odd way, it was different."

Who Fears the Devil, *by Manly Wade Wellman. Ballantine Books, 50¢. 186 pages.*

These are the John the Ballad-Singer stories that appeared in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* some years back, and were more recently collected for an Arkham House book of which this is a reprint. They are narrated by an itinerant guitar-strummer with a knack for getting into supernatural scrapes, and I think they're superb.

An unsympathetic critic—someone who responds to these stories the way I do to those of Burroughs or Rohmer—might retort that this is a silly, mannered book. He might be able to pluck from context passages that seem to verge on self-parody. So be it. These stories—like any with a strong and individual style—are easy to parody and easy to mock.

I happen to think they're first-rate: sensitive, moving, sometimes poetic, often genuinely spooky. They have the texture of unphonied folk literature, and I think some of them will become anthology pieces after the manner of certain Stephen Vincent Benet stories. It isn't wise, though, to read through the book at a sitting, even though Wellman has gone to considerable trouble devising a framework intended to make you do just that. One story a night, just before bedtime, should be about the pace.

Valley of the Flame, *by Henry Kuttner. Ace Books, 40¢. 156 pages.*

A different kind of silliness here, and, for my money, a *good* kind of silliness. Perhaps it's just that Kuttner's approach is a modern one, with the pulp cliches carefully concealed beneath the surface, whereas Rohmer's book, dating from 1929, is too musty to bear reprinting today.

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This is not precisely a new story itself. It appeared in *Startling Stories* in 1947, and I don't think it's been revised for this edition, since Kuttner has been dead since 1958. It's an unremarkable but fast-moving story of a sort Kuttner was doing in great numbers right after the war. Brian Raft, a comic-book character strictly from stock, is a medical man with a taste for adventure who finds himself on an expedition plodding through the Amazon Valley. Drums beat, sinister jungle traders do sinister things, and suddenly the explorers stumble into a weird world lost in the tropical underbrush, complete with lovely priestesses and hidden treasure. In short, this is the millionth retread of H. Rider Haggard, done with unabashed straight face and a good deal of vigor. Kuttner was a craftsman of craftsmen, and even a hack job like this shows his mastery of narrative technique. As a novel it really isn't much better than the Rohmer book; but I suppose this is a kind of bad book I can enjoy, and the other isn't. ■

(*Continued from page 113*)

"This way!" he shouted and pulled her inside the study as a mushrooming cloud began forming thirty miles to the north. For minutes the building rocked.

Stell struggled to free herself from his grasp and cried hysterically, fear and horror making her eyes appear almost bulging against the stark white of her face. She saw his fist coming too late and as she slumped, he caught her. Then he turned again for The Door with her in his arms. He managed to pick up only one of the many suitcases he had packed. The moment the next bomb landed, two blocks away, he opened The Door and crossed through, thinking, twelve thousand years!

He didn't know where they were, or even if they could stay there and live. But they were alive, and he had seen the mural of the cavemen in the next coming surge toward civilization. They had been redheaded, and they had four arms. He let drop the suitcase he had carried. He didn't look at it; he knew it was the one with the files and knives and the pulley.

Stell stirred in his embrace. Fear stared from her eyes.

"It's all right, babe," he said softly. "It's all right. We're going to live and have children, Stell. Some day we'll tell them pretty stories about a Door." She put her two arms about him and held on tightly. Thinking of the radiation they had received, and the mural, he murmured, "And when you have your babies, Stell, you must love them very much." THE END

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(*Continued from page 5*)
craft's own projection of himself —a bookish, reserved young New Englander whose only crime was that he wanted to carry *communication* a mite too far for the weak-stomached by raising the dead from their essential salts simply to *talk* to them endlessly;

The Great Boyg, that living midnight forest darker than the Schwarzwald who played an endless game of dodge-and-meet with Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt;

Couerl, who stalks magnificently through A. E. Van Vogt's *Black Destroyer*, the intelligent emperor of all giant black panthers who ever were . . . and whose only food, in the first magazine version, was called Id;

Duke Ferdinand, from the play *The Duchess of Malfi* by Shakespeare's Jacobean contemporary John Webster . . . Duke Ferdinand, the great grand-daddy of all wolfmen, who loved his sister just a little too well and who growled and clawed up graves in jolly old Renaissance Italy;

Svengali, the beautiful Trilby's highly talented but unappreciated voice teacher and agent-manager, in the end a victim of antimonsteriam but the prototype of all power-hungry hypnotists just the same;

Quasimodo, Victor Hugo's deathless hunchback, who will shamble soulfully forever, loving all humanity but especially Esmeralda, occasionally kicking a roof-tile our way, amongst the dizzyingly high gargoyles and chimeras of Notre Dame de Paris;

And, finally, King Kong (or Kong King, as he was called in Sweden), another vastly misunderstood devotee of beauty, who was simply too large both in soul and body for this crassly commercial world; (a big-thinking anthropoid whose two chief aims were to get rid of the metropolitan blight that is Manhattan and simply be as respectfully tender as possible to Fay Wray. (Do you remember, dear reader, the gesture of infinite and adoring care with which he laid her on a roof ledge of the Empire State Building before turning defiantly to meet the evil machine-gun attack of the four accursed biplanes?)

Yes, *I love monsters.*

THEY have all at times scared me breathless and even now, although they are numbered among my dearest and best-understood friends, they can still give me a friendly chill on lonely dark evenings when the mind is free.

Other people may prefer axe-murderers, bullfighters or bulls, lions and tigers burning bright in the jungle or on the veldt, juvenile delinquents with switchblades and bicycle chains, first-wave marines, successful mono-

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maniac career women (and I must in all fairness add: successful monomaniac career men), torpedoes and gun punks, hanging judges, atomic scientists whooping it up for the H bomb, or homicidal maniacs with razor-keen butcher knives; but I prefer the more romantic figures, friendlier to me, of:

The Phantom of the Opera, another misunderstood voice teacher and bringer of success to young ladies, a man who made the sewers of Paris more livable, even luxuriously so;

Count Dracula, who subsisted not only on the blood of beautiful young ladies, but also on that of his great theatric interpreter Bela Lugosi;

Cthulhu, Lovecraft's gigantic non-Euclidean undersea sleeper, who broadcast thrilling dreams to a bored humanity and made the Pacific Ocean a less lonely vastness;

Nyarlathotep, another Lovecraft character, a dark modern pharoah-magician come out of Egypt to sell the world on death;

The Wolf Man himself—any lusty, satyrish old werewolf with the exotic para-equipment, glamorizing by contrast, of top hat, white tie, and evening tails;

The Red Brain, Donald Wandrei's end-of-the-world creation in the short story of that name, who was so much intriguingly colorful and spun so much faster —to the left, surely, widdershins!—than his conservative gray comrades;

It, whom Ted Sturgeon sent stumbling forever across forest and countryside, dropping graveyard mold and scattering the dead leaves every bit as effectively as Shelley's west wind;

Archimago, who lurks behind the enchanted avenues and murmurous poetry of Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, prototype of all queen-kidnapping, princess-starved, infant-enticing black magicians;

The Man Who Laughs, Victor Hugo's creation with a face carved in infancy into a clown-mask, who delivered to the parliament of King James the Second half of a terrifying humanitarian address before his lip slipped, his clown-mask reappeared, and the rest of his address was drowned in laughter;

And, to make an arbitrary end the Mummy, whose only misdeed was that he wanted immortality to be a reality rather than a fiction and who was willing to work and unwind himself for it.

See? I do love monsters. Really.

LET'S get down to definitions and give the essence of the creature under discussion. A monster is a symbol of the secret and powerful, the dangerous and unknown, arousing dread and curiosity, exaltation and fright-

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ened laughter. An old geographer looks at the large blank spaces of his finished map and inks in "Here Be Monsters." Perhaps his imagination is stirred and he draws a little picture of . . . something. A Lovecraft peoples with monsters alien planets and dimensions. A Poe lifts from the equally unbounded darkness of the mind a William Wilson, a Metzengerstein, a House of Usher, a Man of the Crowd or an Imp of the Perverse.

A symbol of this sort has a thousand meanings and more. So a monster, symbolizing that about which we can only speculate and wonder, is a master symbol suggesting the remotest mysteries of nature and human nature, the most dimly-sensed secrets of space, time, and the hidden regions of the mind.

Innumerable uncertain meanings lurk like will 'o the wisps behind the dusty, seamed and cleated mask and milkily veiled eyes of Frankenstein's monster or the three-lobed flaming orb of the Haunter of the Dark.

An Arthur Machen expresses his reactions to industrial London in terms of murderous Pictish troglodytes skulking about its environs and creates Helen Vaughan in *The Great God Pan* as a guise for a thousand mysterious speculations in the direction of violence, sex, and evolutionary theory.

Noseless, dome-foreheaded, cavern-eyed, fang-toothed Erik of *The Phantom of the Opera* is Everyman's knowledge of the killer and rapist and torturer inside him, the god demanding worship and infinite solace, the imposter dreading—and perhaps at the deepest level hoping—that someone will lift his love-mask and discover the hateful truth. An E. E. Smith dreams prophetically in his *Lensmen* and *Skylark* stories of fascism and man's boundless ego in terms of a Boskone, a Helmuth, an Overlord of Delgon, and other cosmic power-hungers. An Oscar Wilde writes of the crueler aspects of the art of life and of the darker side of his homosexuality in terms of a Dorian Gray. Stevenson extrapolates from alcoholism to Mr. Hyde.

In short, living monsters are full-charged with a tingling energy of meaning. (As a child I did not have to be told they were as dangerous to the touch as a high-voltage wire.) Dead monsters, reduced to husks or masks of themselves, are another matter, which we will take up later.

MONSTERS are door-breakers, Space-Eaters. They have power beyond their energy of meaning, they are gigantic in one way or another, they are destroyers of bodies and minds and cities and planets.

They are shape-changers too:

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man turned to wolf or bat, dead come alive, carrion shocked into pulsifing flesh, Helen Vaughan become slime, Charles Dexter Ward dust. At the alien extreme there are the amorphous shoggoths, their protoplasm molded by hypnotic suggestion, and the man-counterfeiting being from a bluer sun in John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?" Closest to home perhaps we have Jekyll-Hyde, a byword for the basic shape-change. Practically all monsters are fundamentally schizoid, symbolizing on the subjective frontier evil, aggression, original sin, the unconscious, the id, the death wish, animus or anima, the shadow.

Monsters are also deviants, mutant mules, only one of their kinds, symbols of uniqueness and identity, supreme embodiments of individualism. And most of them are crippled or disfigured in some way, if not physically or even mentally, then at least by earth's environment, hostile to them. It is not surprising that the rejected or "different" child should be tempted to put on the mask of the monster. The way of all ways to impress and control and very often delight others is to *scare them.* In *Look Homeward, Angel* Thomas Wolfe gives a vivid picture of a child experiencing a sense of power by identification with green-visaged ghoulish riders of the night wind. Men are old hands at putting on monster masks.

It is likewise appropriate that the chief collection of Lovecraft's writings should take its title from his short story *The Outsider,* where after the fashion of the Red Death a lonely ghoul routes a household of merry-making normals and so comes to a full realization of his own abnormality. This vivid picture of the confrontation of the conforming crowd by the "inner-directed" deviant points up one of the chief trends in fantasy writing during the last three decades: the compulsion to understand the monster.

This trend is one of the marks of the transition from supernatural horror to science fiction and appears most clearly in the contrast between the extraterrestrial beings of Lovecraft and those of, say, Weinbaum or Heinlein or Smith, with the monsters of Van Vogt somewhere in between. You can even say that one writer sets a problem by creating a monster. Then another writer may attempt to solve the problem by explaining the monster, sometimes by speculations about the physics and chemistry of alien planets and sometimes by showing us what the first writer has or may have projected into his creation from himself and the world. This process is crucial in the growth pattern and life history of monsters in the realm of art.

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One of the clearest indications that the monster symbolizes the deviant individual is the frequency with which he appears in the guise of scapegoat, first mocked, then feared, and finally destroyed by the mob. The pursuit of the monster through the night by a torch-bearing pack of peasants or protelariat has become a traditional closing phase of many horror movies, additionally suggesting that the monster may symbolize the aristocrat hunted down by the revolutionary horde. But the mockery is the most interesting ingredient. The Man Who Laughs—prototype of the Phantom—must himself first be laughed at before he can, by a supreme effort of will, fix his features in the fright-mask that is his only alternative to appearing ridiculous. H. G. Wells understood this aspect of the monster most sympathetically and gives us an unforgettable picture of it in his Invisible Man as he changes from a figure of voyeuristic and magic might into a pitable fugitive, his very power become the peculiarity that marks him down for pursuit and destruction.

MONSTERS are modeled on creatures of primitive folklore and religious legend: the werewolf, the vampire, the ghoul, the golem, the devil, the demon, the incubus and succubus, the zombie, the ghost. It must never be forgotten that during most of man's history such creatures were generally believed in, except for the handful of wise or cynical skeptics who have probably existed in all ages, and were regularly and seriously invoked by some individuals to control others. The priest made use of the devil, grandmother of the bogeymen, the kluxer of the hant.

The witchdoctor's power is a byword and the proto-monster is one of the masks of authority. Such creatures of folklore and legend collectively come close to constituting the whole of superstition, a malign and reactionary force the hold of which on the human mind has only been broken by generations of bold propagandizing for science and humanism. So the artist who creates monsters from the raw material of such folk-creatures should realize that he is undertaking something that will appear dubious to many.

He knows that he is trying only to design an artistic symbol and give his audience a harmless thrill of fear, asking not for belief but merely for momentary suspension of disbelief. However, many of his sober-minded and perhaps less imaginative critics will feel that he is simply trying to create a new superstition or refurbish an old one and that he is deliberately playing on and re-

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stimulating some of mankind's most deep-rooted and debasing dreads.

The victory of science over superstition is new and by no means complete and there *is* a real sense in which the artist specializing in tales of supernatural horror is merely playing with emotions left over in man from less skeptical and sophisticated eras. So he must not be surprised if he meets with criticism or if members of his audience suddenly rise and with a surprisingly great enthusiasm begin to debunk his monsters—from the child who never stops explaining how the movie dinosaurs are really tiny models to the intellectual with a psychoanalytic theory of the vampire or of the author who writes about him.

Besides that, there is still a little real scare left in monsters and it is still necessary for people to rationalize them away again from time to time. They would hardly sleep easily otherwise.

Artists, particularly fantasy artists, outsiders themselves in one or more ways, are apt to be the only true friends monsters ever have, understanding them too well ever to turn on them. Robert Bloch and Ray Bradbury are notable examples. One thinks of the many Bloch stories in which the monster successfully asserts his genius and triumphs over his victim, whether man or city; or the typical Bradbury tale in which a technology-worshipping culture that has supposedly been disinfected of all criminally imaginative taints is invaded and destroyed by some eldritch being of myth presented as sympathetically and in as homey a light as Booth Tarkington's.

MONSTERS have a longer or shorter lifetime in the realm of art and in the minds of the individual members of their audience. Newly-created monsters, as we have seen, are electric with mystery and rich in implications. But monsters age and die. They invite understanding and perish when they get it. The blank spaces on the map fill up with names and distances. This unknown of which the monster is a symbol gradually becomes the known or at least the speculatively well-explored. The investigations of psychoanalysts are rounded out, widely disseminated, even popularized in various simplified versions. The atom's power is unlocked and Sunday supplements tell how. Old taboos are lifted. Rockets pierce the stratosphere and orbit in space.

It becomes commonly accepted that the universe sustains trillions of planets teaming with alien life-forms, and engineering institutions like MIT limber up students' minds by having them

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design dwellings, furnishings and vehicles adapted to specific hypothetical non-human lifeforms and unearthly conditions. The monster, whether Mr. Hyde or Yog-Sothoth, becomes an empty husk, or mask, because enough (though by no means all) of what he symbolizes has been satisfactorily identified. People can point to him and to their former fear of him and say such things as "Death Wish," "Nitrogen-breather," "Anima," "Copper-blooded," "Castration Complex," "Antigravity," with all the effect of an exorcism by cross, prayer and holy water.

Unsympathetic overexploitation hastens the death of monsters. At best a monster is like a cat—he has only so many lives in him. Each appearance he makes permanently robs him of a little of his power. Competent writers of horror stories know this very well and practice judicious restraint in their tales, carefully building a menacing atmosphere to prepare the reader, next allowing him to glimpse the monster, finally permitting him usually only one full view or one sequence with the monster in full view.

Even motion pictures at one time followed this formula, judging from *The Phantom of the Opera*. But with repeated appearances the monster comes more and more to be handled as a stage prop that can be whisked on and off the setting at will and shaken repeatedly in the faces of the audience. Of course when the monster is finally truly dead, meaning when he dies as a symbol, then his remains can be handled, shown around and mocked with complete impunity.

And almost needless to say, he can be fictionally revived, quite dead in spirit, from any number of lava baths, atomic explosions, and entombments in the vacuum of interstellar space.

THE husks or masks of monsters are very safe to jeer at and highly suitable for a more or less sinister sort of play. A witty person can put on such a mask, either figuratively or literally, and perhaps throw a momentary scare into his little brother or girlfriend and at least surely evoke the admiring guffaws of his less enterprising companions. Dracula and Frankenstein in unexpected or grotesque situations become the subject of endless cartoons. Purely farcical stories or television series featuring households of monsters are written. Entire magazines can be composed of the pictures of artistically dead monsters with suitable wise-cracking captions. Much laughter can be evoked by replacing the clean-cut young man of the advertisements with a dead monster, preferably in an

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advanced state of decay. Fun magazines like *Mad* flourish, featuring the humor of the grotesque, violent and monstrous.

Sometimes such humor is even truly satirical—one must admit that the fanged and shock-headed carrion monster is a delightful counter-figure to the pearly-toothed, eternally glowing, stridently healthy princess of the billboards. Beyond that, monsters have become background material for a growing cult of ugliness where the key question is, "What's the most disgusting thing you can think of?" It was by no mere chance that when Al Capp solicited his readers to draw pictures of the most ugly face they could imagine he got an enthusiastic response. Time was when the monster had a certain sinister beauty, but the ugliness cult seems to be interested in nothing but guffaws. The more of a lout the monster is, the better they like it.

However, it is futile for the monster-lover to become indignant at the degraded use to which some of his favorite fictional personages are put. He can remind himself that, on the best interpretation, the mockers of monsters are simply reenacting the old assault of scientific skepticism on superstition. Of course on the worst interpretation they are mocking the deviant, the cripple, and the exceptional individual under cover of mocking the monster, but perhaps the less thought about the interpretation the better, at least for the moment.

People have always liked to wear the masks of monsters, as shown by such festivals as Halloween, Mardi Gras and Fasching. Such masks can be used defensively as well as offensively and there is certainly a touch of the monster in the cold collective face, masked by black-lensed glasses, which the hipsters, hepcats and socalled beatniks turn on the world. In the realm of weed and cool sound the mask of the black magician is the obvious one to wear.

Ages of optimism, civil liberty, and peace (at least for the artist and his audience) appear to be most favorable to the healthy growth of richly symbolic monsters. Secure times, when law and order seem to rule and life appears to conform to familiar habits and traditions, provide an effective setting for the monster, just as they do for the classic British detective story, where the general security is disturbed only to be reestablished more firmly with the detection and capture of the criminal.

During such times, too, the average person's more primal fears slumber most of the time; the business of daily living rarely calls them forth; it takes the

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artist to rouse and exercise and perhaps exorcise them. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the time of Machen, Dunsany, Blackwood, M. R. James, Stoker, Haggard, Wilde, Lovecraft, C. A. Smith and other masters of the monster story.

CONVERSELY, periods of war, insecurity, police tyranny, and immediate peril to the individual and his self-respect seem much less favorable to the creation and appreciation of monsters, (though we must remember that then all art suffers). Such periods may provide excellent fictional settings for monsters, as witness Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* and various horror stories revolving around other French revolutions, and they certainly furnish much potential raw material for monster stories. But supernatural terror is thin fare for people fearing a more material knock at the door and a death that drops from the air shrieking in steel-cased bombs rather than fluttering on the wings of a shape-changing bat.

Psychiatrists who were there report that neurosis practically disappeared in Europe under the Nazi terror, although psychosis claimed quite as many victims as ever. Similarly, monster stories, no matter how subtle and rich their symbolism, will hardly appeal as a bedtime tidbit to persons who have "supped full of horrors."

During times of total war, some men become monsters and physical horror may not only swallow up supernatural terror but seek to engulf the whole world of the spirit. The Nazi concentration camps reproduced in literal fact much of the situations and paraphernalia of the more lurid horror story. There the questions "What's the most disgusting thing you can think of?" and "What's the worst torture you can imagine?" became more than academic. Those in charge not only wore the masks of monsters, but sought to force their victims to wear them. Starvation, torture, and a killing but unpredictable discipline were systematically imposed with the object of turning men and women into spiritless beasts.

A cult of the humor of the degraded and grotesque not unrelated to our current ugliness cult grew up and flourished. The more unsuitable the clothing allotted to the prisoners, the more senseless the tasks imposed on them, the more impossible the choices forced upon them, then the wittier the resultant amusement.

There the drama of the monster as scapegoat was daily reenacted—the shambling and twitching beast-man surrounded

(*Continued on page 130*)

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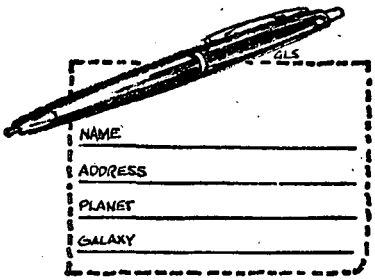

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(continued from page 126)

by his mockers and tormenters. There deviation—whether it derived from a person being a Jew, Gypsy, or Social Democrat, or merely a thinker or sometimes even just an eccentric—received its ultimate punishment as it did in the days of the Witch Cult and the Inquisition.

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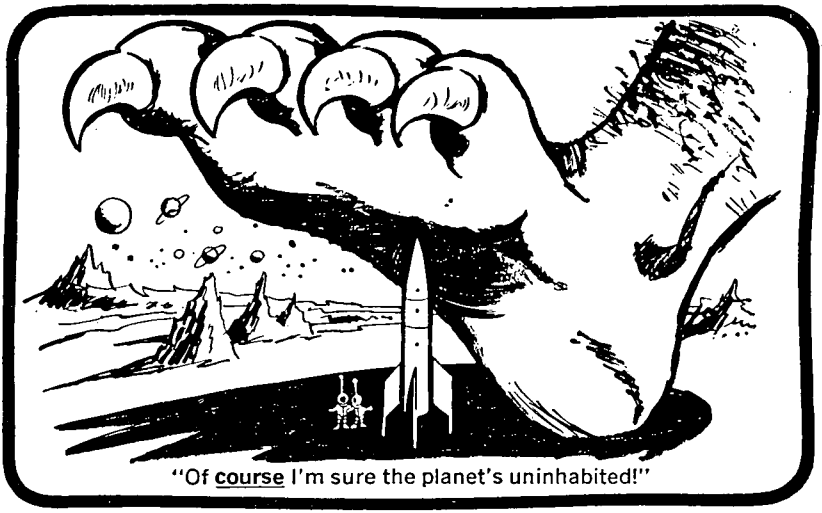

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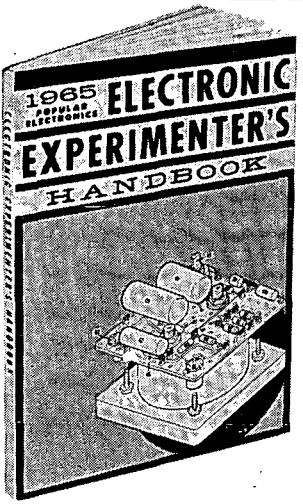

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